RED LOVE

BY

ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAY

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FOREWORD

To the English Edition

This novel is neither a study in "morals," nor a picture of the standard of life in Soviet Russia. It is a purely psychological study of sex-relations in the post-war period.

I have chosen the environment of my own country and made my own people protagonists, for I know them better and could give a more vivid picture of their inner life and characters. Many of the problems presented are not exclusively Soviet-Russian; they are world-wide facts, which can be noted in all countries. These silent psychological dramas, born of the change in the sexual relations; this evolution, especially, in the feelings of women, are well known to the younger generation of Europe.

Do we ever judge a man for his conduct in love-affairs? Generally, if he does not overstep certain, very flexible limits, we say that his sexual life is his own "private affair." The character of a man is evaluated not by his conduct in family morals, but by his efficiency in work, by his intellect, his will, his usefulness to the State and Society. As long as the majority of women had no direct duties to the State or to Society, as long as their whole activity was concentrated within the family limits, civilized nations demanded no other qualities in woman than that she display "good morals" in sexual and family life.

FOREWORD

Now, when more than half of the grown-up women-citizens in most countries toil and struggle, just as the men do, Society puts new demands on the women. Their ability to respond to the social duties of a citizen begins to have more value than their "goodness" and "stainlessness" in family-morals. Family life is not the unique field of activity for women nowadays; often enough her family duties come into bitter conflict with her out-of-home work and her public duties. It is only natural, therefore, that the method of evaluating a woman today is different from that of our grandfathers and grandmothers.

Though a woman may, at the present time, attain "perfection" in the current bourgeois standard of family morals, and be "esteemed" by her own people, she may neither receive the real appreciation of society nor the "respect" of the State. She will merely be "overlooked." On the contrary: a woman may not be "spotless" from the point of view of current bourgeois sex morals, but if she is an outstanding figure in politics, art, science, etc., one will not even "whisper" about her behind her back. Were one to put into the balance two women: one with "good morals," but who never did any useful work for the country or humanity, and the other, whose "family morals" are not free from criticism, but who is an efficient public worker—there would be no doubt about the choice.

Our criteria in sex morals are always changing. There is never a standstill. There are merely periods in human history when the evolution of morals goes on more rapidly, other periods (with a general stagnation in all fields of life) when change seems to relax. Only half a century ago Dumas-fils wrote of a "divorcée" as of a "fallen"

creature, while today France openly discusses the question of equalizing the rights of non-legal mothers with those of legally married women. There remains less and less of the old bourgeois hypocrisy in our way of thinking and judging of sex morals.

I do hope that this book will aid in combating the old, bourgeois hypocrisy in moral values and show once more that we are beginning to respect woman, not for her "good morals," but for her efficiency, for her ingenuity with respect to her duties toward her class, her country and humanity as a whole.

Mexico City, March 10th, 1927

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LOVE

CHAPTER I

Vassilissa was a working-girl twenty-eight years old, a knitter by trade. Thin, anemic, a typical child of the city. Her hair, cut short after typhus, grew in curls. From a distance she looked like a boy. She was flat-chested, and wore a shirtwaist and a wornout leather belt. She was not pretty. But her eyes were beautiful: brown, friendly, observant. Thoughtful eyes. Those eyes would never pass by another's sorrow.

She was a Communist. At the beginning of the war she had become a Bolshevik. She hated the war from the first. Collections had been made in the shop for the front; people were ready to work overtime for the Russian victory. But Vassilissa objected. War was a bloody horror. What was the good of it? War brought hardships to the people. And you felt so sorry for the soldiers, the poor young fellows—like sheep being led to the slaughter. When Vassilissa met a detachment on the street, going to war in full military array, she always had to turn away. They were going to meet death, but they shouted and sang at the top of their lungs! And how lustily they sang, as if they were out for a holiday. What forced them? They should have refused: We won't go to our death;

we won't kill other men! Then there would be no war.

Vassilissa was able to read and write well; she had learned from her father, a compositor. She read Tolstoy and liked his work.

In the shop she was the only one "for peace." She would have been discharged, but all hands were needed. The manager looked askance at her, but did not let her go. Soon Vassilissa was known throughout the district: she is against the war, a follower of Tolstoy. The women stopped speaking to her: she doesn't want to have anything to do with her country; she doesn't love Russia. She is lost!

Reports of her reached the local organizer, a Bolshevik. He became acquainted with Vassilissa, and talked with her; soon his opinion was formed: "A girl of character; knows what she's about. The party could use her."

She was drawn into the organization. But Vassilissa did not become a Bolshevik immediately. She quarreled with the members of the Party. Asked them questions, and went away furious. After long deliberation she came back of her own accord, saying: "I want to work with you."

During the Revolution she helped in the work of organization, and became a member of the Workers' Council. She liked the Bolsheviki and admired Lenin because he opposed the war so uncompromisingly.

In her debates with the Mensheviki and the Social Revolutionists she spoke skilfully, heatedly, tempestuously, never at a loss for words. The other women, working-women, were timid, but Vassilissa always spoke up without hesitation whenever it was necessary. And what she said always was clear and to the point.

She won the respect of her comrades. Under Kerensky she was a candidate for the municipal Duma. The girls in the knitting-shop were proud of her. Now her every word was law. Vassilissa knew how to manage women, speaking amicably, upbraiding them, as the case required. She knew everyone's troubles, for she had been in the factory herself since her girlhood. And she defended their interests. Her comrades sometimes rebuked her: "Can't you forget your women? We have no time for them now—there are more important things."

Vassilissa flared up, gave the Comrades a good berating, and quarreled with the district secretary. But she did not withdraw her demands. "Why are women's affairs less important? This idea is a habit with all of you. That's why women are 'backward.' But you can't have a revolution without the women. Woman is everything. Man does what she thinks and suggests to him. If you win over the women, half your work is done."

Vassilissa was very belligerent in '18. She knew what she wanted; and she did not compromise. The others relaxed a bit in the last few years, lagged behind

and stayed at home. But Vassilissa carried on. Always fighting, always organizing something, always insisting on a definite point.

She was tireless. Where did she get her energy? She was delicate, with not a drop of blood in her face—only eyes. Sympathetic eyes, intelligent and observant.

* * * * *

Vassilissa received a letter, the long and hungrily expected letter from her man, her comrade, her lover. They had been separated for months. There was nothing they could do about it. First the civil war, and now the "economic front." The party was mobilizing all its members. The Revolution was no game; it demanded sacrifices from everybody. So Vassilissa, too, brought her sacrifice to the Revolution. Nearly always she had to live without her lover, far away from him. They were torn apart, at opposite ends of Russia. Her friends said: "You're better off this way. He'll love you longer, because he won't get tired of you." Perhaps they were right; but life was sad without him. True, Vassilissa had little free time. From early morning until late at night she was overwhelmed with work for the Party and for the Soviet, one crowding out the other. Important, urgent, fascinating work. But when she came to her little room her heart was convulsed with longing for her lover. She felt an icy draught. She would sit down to drink

tea and to think. It seemed as if no one needed her. As if she had no comrades, although she had worked with them all day—as if she had no goal for which she was striving. What was the use of it all? Who wanted it? Mankind? Men couldn't appreciate it. Today, again, they had spoiled something, called one another names, made complaints. Everyone was working for himself alone. They refused to understand that they must live for society. They could not understand.

Even Vassilissa had been insulted, rudely abused, reproached for her worker's *payok* (ration-card). The devil take it—she didn't need it! Her comrades had persuaded her. Now her strength was leaving her; she felt dizzy. There she sat, leaning on the table, and drank her tea, nibbled rock-candy, and brooded over all the affronts of the day. Now she could see nothing good or splendid in the Revolution. Only failure, vexation and struggle.

If only her lover had been there. Then she could have talked and unburdened her heart. He would have caressed her tenderly.

"Why so dejected, Vasya? A tomboy like you, afraid of no one, challenging everybody, overlooking nothing—and now look at her: there she sits with ruffled feathers, like a puffed-up sparrow under the gable!"

He would pick her up; he was strong, would carry her about the room like a child and sing a lullaby.

They would laugh—her heart ached with joy. Oh, how Vassilissa adored her lover, her man and comrade. A handsome fellow, tender and loving—so tender.

Thinking of him, Vassilissa felt even more wretched. Her attic was so desolate, so lonely. She sighed. Clearing away the tea things, she scolded herself. What in the world do you want? Do you expect only joy from life? You love your work. You have the esteem of your comrades. And then you have your lover. Isn't that more than enough, Vassilissa Dementyevna? The Revolution is no holiday; everyone must sacrifice. "Everything for the commonweal; everything for the triumph of the Revolution."

* * * * *

Thus Vassilissa in the winter. But now it was spring. The sun shone so gayly, the sparrows chattered under the gables. Early in the morning Vassilissa watched them, smiling as she remembered her lover calling her a puffed-up sparrow. Spring sounded a call to life. It was more and more difficult to work. Vassilissa was anemic, and her lungs were affected.

Vassilissa had organized a community house, a task she had taken over of her own accord, and which was entirely independent of her general Party and Soviet work. This community house was dearest of all to her. She had long had the idea of organizing a model house, where the Communist spirit should prevail.

Not an ordinary community house, where everyone would live for himself, where no one cared for his neighbor, where squabbling, bickering, and dissatisfaction were the rule, where no one was willing to work for the common good, where everyone was constantly making demands. No, Vassilissa had planned something quite different. Patiently, almost secretly, she had got the house ready. How many difficulties she had had! The house had been taken away from her twice. It had involved her in innumerable disputes. But finally she had succeeded. Had organized it: a community kitchen, a laundry, a nursery, a dining-room—Vassilissa's pride, with curtains at the windows, and geranium plants—and a library, furnished like a club room.

At the beginning everything went well. The women who lived in the house covered Vassilissa with their moist kisses: "There's our little darling. Our guardian angel. You've made everything so easy for us. It's too wonderful."

But then the trouble began. The house rules were broken. It was impossible to teach the women cleanliness. They fought over the pots and pans in the kitchen. They let the washtubs overflow, almost flooding the house. And every mistake, every quarrel, every disturbance brought complaints against Vassilissa, as if she were the "landlady," as if she had been at fault. Punishments became necessary. The tenants grew angry, felt offended; some of them moved away.

Matters went on in this fashion, growing worse and worse. Constant quarrels and differences. There were a couple of real trouble-makers, the Fedosseyevs; nothing could please them. Always nagging and nagging, though they didn't know themselves what they wanted; never satisfied. And they stirred up the others. Chiefly because they had been the first to move into the house, and felt as if it belonged to them. But what did they want? What didn't they like? Vassilissa couldn't understand. And they embittered her life, caused trouble every day.

Vassilissa was weary, vexed to tears. She saw the failure of her plan. Then, a new order: everything must be paid for with cash on delivery. Water and electricity. Taxes must be paid, assessments must be covered. Vassilissa was beset on all sides. There was no use! The new exchange rate. Nothing could be done without money. Vassilissa worked like a slave. It might have been better to drop the whole business. But she was not that sort. Once she put her hand to anything, she saw it through.

She went to Moscow, visiting various bureaus day after day. She approached the highest authorities. Her reports and accounts were received very favorably; finally she won her community house. They even assisted her with an allowance for repairs. But in the future she would nevertheless have to make the house self-supporting.

Vassilissa returned delighted. The Fedosseyevs, however, were sulky. They were cross with her, as if she had harmed them by winning her fight for the community house.

Now new worries began. The rumor spread that Vassilissa did not keep her house accounts straight, that she made a little profit on the side.

It was hard, then, without her lover. She needed a close comrade. She wrote to him, called him. But important affairs prevented his coming. He had a new position of great responsibility. He had to systematize and reorganize the affairs of the firm in which he had formerly been a clerk. He had been complaining all winter; it was a difficult task. It was impossible for him to get away. Everything rested on his shoulders.

So Vassilissa remained alone in all her difficulties, drained to the dregs the cup of man's unfairness. And who was unfair? Her own people, her comrades, the workers! This hurt more than anything else. If it had only been the *burshui!*

When the Fedosseyevs were to be put out, the two of them begged Vassilissa to forgive them, assured her that they had always esteemed her. But she could not enjoy her victory. She was tired, worn out, too exhausted to be glad. She fell ill.

Then she returned to her work. But in her soul something had died.

She no longer loved the community house. It was as if her child had been violated. Like an incident of

her childhood: her brother, Kolyka, showed her a piece of candy. But when she reached out for it he laughed spitefully, saying: "Now I'll make it disgusting for you."

And he spat on it. "Why don't you eat your candy, Vassilissa? It's good."

But Vassilissa turned away in tears. "You dirty thing! You bully! You good-for-nothing! Why did you spoil my candy?"

This was how she felt about the community house now. She was sick of it. True, the management was still in her hands, but her heart wasn't in it. If only she could get away! Her relations with the tenants had been spoiled. Were they not against her? Didn't they side with the Fedosseyevs? And why? Why?

On the whole, she lost her interest in people. Before, Vassilissa had been much more warm-hearted. She had thought of everyone, pitied everyone, worried about everyone. Now she wanted only one thing: leave me alone. Don't touch me! I'm tired.

CHAPTER II

Spring was peeping through the window of Vassilissa's attic, high up under the roof. The warm sun peeped in, and the spring sky, with its fleecy clouds, white, delicate, melting away. Next door was the roof of what had been a gentleman's house, and now was used as the Mothers' Home. Behind it lay a garden; the buds were beginning to swell. Spring, beloved spring was late, but it had come at last.

Today there was spring in Vassilissa's heart also. It had almost frozen in the winter; always lonely, always alone. Constant worries, struggles, irritations. But today was a holiday, a real holiday. There was a letter from her lover, from her dearest Volodya. And what a letter! It was a long time since she had got a letter like that.

"Don't torture me, Vasya; my patience is at an end. How often you've promised to come to me for a visit! But you always disappoint me, you hurt me, you tireless tomboy of mine. Have you been fighting with everybody again? There were rumors about you even among the comrades here. They say you even got into the papers. But since you came out on top in

this business, come to your beloved Volodya now. He can hardly wait for you.

"You'll see, we'll live like fine people. I have a horse and a cow of my own, and an automobile always at my disposal. I have servants, so that you will have no work to do in the house, but can take a good rest. Spring is at its height here; the apple trees are in full bloom. Vasya, darling tomboy—we've never spent a spring together. But our life must always be like the spring.

"Anyway, I need you very much just now. I'm having trouble with the Party Committee here. They have it in for me. They can't forget that I was once an anarchist. It started on account of Savelyev, as I wrote you. You'll have to straighten out this business. I'm sick of all these meddlers. They don't let you breathe! It's hard for them to find anything against me. I'm doing my duty well. But all the same, I need you very much now.

"I kiss your brown eyes.

"Yours forever,
"Volodya."

Vassilissa sat beside the window, watching the white clouds in the sky, and thinking. Her eyes were smiling. A good letter! Volodya loved her, very much. And how she loved him! She laid the letter on her knees and stroked it as if it were Volodya's head. She didn't see the blue sky, the roof, the clouds. She saw

only her handsome Volodya with his mischievously twinkling eyes. Vassilissa loved him, loved him so that it hurt. How had she ever lived through the entire winter without him? She hadn't seen him for seven months. And it seemed to her that she had little thought of him, little longing for him. She had no time to think of her man, or to yearn for him. How much trouble and worry she had had during the winter! The child of her heart, the community house, was safe; but she had had to quarrel with stupid, uncomprehending, uncultured people. And she had hidden her love and longing for Volodya in the innermost corner of her heart. Her love for him dwelt in her heart, unchangeable. Thinking of him, Vassilissa felt that he was there, in her heart. A sweet burden, she actually felt the weight of her love. Probably because she always had to be worrying about him. If only nothing happened to him. He did not maintain discipline. The comrades were right. Vassilissa knew it. They accused him of being an "anarchist." He didn't like to follow instructions, preferred to do things in his own way. But he made up for this with his work.

This was why they lived separately, so that they wouldn't disturb each other; for she too was in her work with all her heart and soul. But when Volodya was around, she would be drawn to him, and her work would suffer.

"First our work, and then our love, don't you think so, Vasya?" said Vladimir, and Vasya agreed. Their

ideas were the same. And it was so wonderful that they were not merely man and wife, but comrades as well. Now, again, he summoned her to help him like a comrade, to overcome his difficulties. What sort of difficulties? Vassilissa read the letter again.

A mist seemed to form before her eyes. If it was on account of Savelyev, it would be a nasty affair. This Savelyev was a speculator; he was crooked. Why did Volodya have anything to do with him? A manager, such as Volodya was now, had to be as blameless as a saint, had to avoid all rogues. Volodya, however, was a trusting soul. He felt sorry for Savelyev, stood up for him. Still, no one should feel sorry for such men, who were stealing the property of the people. Let them suffer the penalty for their misdeeds.

But Volodya was kind-hearted; and the others could not understand him. They would have other explanations for this friendship. Volodya had many enemies, for he was hot-headed, unable to control his tongue. If only matters wouldn't develop as they had three years ago. If only no action were brought against him. It was easy to lose one's reputation. A charge could be trumped up against anyone. Vassilissa's experience had taught her that. Hadn't people been stirred up against her all winter long? Now it was Volodya's turn.

She would have to go to him, and help him. She had to stand by him, so that his comrades there would

be ashamed of themselves. What was there to think about? She would get ready and go.

But the house? She didn't care. There was nothing to salvage now. Everything was going to ruin anyhow. Even though Vassilissa had won the fight, the Fedosseyevs were the actual victors. It was impossible to save anything. Vassilissa sighed. Going to the window, she looked down into the court. As if she were bidding the house farewell. She stood there for a long time. Gravely, sadly.

Suddenly it struck her. "Soon I'll see Volodya again!" Her cheeks flushed, her heart beat with joy. My beloved, my dearest. I'm coming, coming to you. My Volodya.

* * * * *

Vassilissa was sitting in the coach, sleeping. It was her second day of travel. Another twenty-four hours lay ahead of her.

This trip was different from her others. She was provided with every comfort, like a *burshuika*. Vladimir had sent her the money for the trip, (everything had to be paid for nowadays), and had asked that she go in the sleeping-car. Besides, he had sent her a piece of cloth for a suit. A manager's lady had to be well dressed. Vassilissa had to laugh when a comrade came from Vladimir Ivanovitch, the director, and brought her the money and the cloth. He praised the

quality like a true salesman. Vasya laughed and teased the Comrade. But he seemed offended. He had not been joking; the material really was excellent. Vasya said nothing more. These new Comrades, the economists, were beyond her comprehension.

For a long time Vasya turned the cloth over and over. She was not used to thinking of clothes. But if Volodya wanted it, so that his wife would not be too conspicuous—all right. She would have a fashionable suit made, such as everyone was wearing.

She went to a friend, the seamstress Grusha, and told her the story. "Make it nice and stylish, Grusha, like the clothes others wear."

Grusha pulled out some fashion magazines that a comrade had brought her from Moscow the previous fall. She had sewed according to it all winter, to the satisfaction of all.

"That's fine, Grusha. You select something. I don't understand such things. If it's neat and not torn, I'm satisfied. I know nothing about the styles."

Moistening her finger-tips, Grusha spent some time in turning over the leaves of the much-used magazine. At last she found her choice.

"There! This'll be good for you. You are thin, you need something to make you seem fuller. This is just the thing for you. A little fullness in the sides, and pleats in front, then you won't look so flat. I'll fix it so that your man will like you."

"Then that's settled."

They agreed on a price, and kissed. Vassilissa went away happy. It was a good thing there were dressmakers in the world. She would never have been able to make a dress by herself. Volodya, however, was a connoisseur of women's clothes. Of course, for in America he had been employed in a fashionable women's wear shop. And now his knowledge was useful to him. The Red merchants must know something of women's clothes; they were a form of merchandise.

* * * * *

Vassilissa was sitting at the window of her sleeping compartment. She was alone. Her neighbor, a "Nep" girl, very loud, dressed in silks, heavily perfumed, her ears weighed down with rings, had gone into the next compartment, where she was laughing loudly with her "cavaliers."

She had given Vassilissa the cold shoulder, curling her lips contemptuously. "Beg pardon, dear, but you're sitting on my shawl. You'll crease it." Or, "Won't you go out into the corridor, dear, while I get undressed for the night?" As if she, the perfumed Nep-girl, owned the compartment, and had let Vassilissa in only out of the kindness of her heart. Vassilissa didn't like the Nep-girl's calling her "dear." But she didn't want to start a quarrel. Let her go to the devil!

Night was falling. Bluish gray shadows covered the young fields. Over the distant purplish-black strip of woods the sun hung like a red ball of fire. The rooks had risen from the fields, and were circling in the air. The wires were rising and falling between the telegraph poles.

With the twilight an unaccountable anxiety and longing crept into Vassilissa's heart. Not sadness, but longing. She had prepared for the journey, settled her affairs. And suddenly everybody had been sorry to see her leave. Perhaps she would never return.

The Fedosseyev woman had come to her, had embraced her, had wept and begged her pardon. It had been painful. In her inmost heart Vassilissa was not angry with Fedosseyeva; but she had no respect for her, as she was unable to respect others of her kind.

Vassilissa's comrades had accompanied her to the station. The children of the community house had brought paper flowers they had made themselves. And Vassilissa realized that she had not given her strength and energy in vain. The seed was sown; something would grow.

When the train began to roll out, the tears rose to her eyes. They were waving their caps. Suddenly she loved them all so much. It was hard to leave them.

But hardly had the city dropped behind her, hardly had the wooded strips and suburban settlements begun to approach her and then hasten away, as if they were running a race, than Vassilissa forgot her community

house, the joys and sorrows of the winter. Swifter than the train, her thoughts rushed far ahead to him for whom she longed.

Why was Vassilissa so melancholy now? Whence the longing that had crept into her heart? It was as if a cold vise were gripping her heart. What was she longing for? Perhaps it was because with the community house a piece of her life had dropped into the past, never to return, had disappeared like those narrow fields that shone like amber in the spring sun.

She began to cry. Softly, inperceptibly. She wiped away her tears, and felt relieved, as if the cold little lump of yearning that had tortured her heart had dissipated together with the tears on the skirt of her new dress.

The lights were turned on in the car, the shades pulled down. It suddenly became cozy, and her loneliness disappeared.

Vassilissa's heart, not her mind, knew very clearly: two more nights and then she would see Volodya, would see him, embrace him. She felt his burning lips and strong arms, heard his voice.

A sweet languor throbbed through her body, her eyes were laughing. If it hadn't been for the Nep-girl, who was fussing before the mirror, Vassilissa would have sung with joy. Loudly, as the birds sing of spring.

The Nep-girl was gone, the door banged. Stupid woman! Closing her eyes, Vassilissa thought of Vlad-

imir, her lover. Dreaming, she read page after page of the story of their love. They had been in love for five years. She could hardly believe it—five years.

She felt as if they had met only yesterday.

She settled down more comfortably in the corner of her compartment, her feet drawn up, her eyes closed. The gentle rocking of the car relaxed her entire body. Her thoughts, however, hurried on and on.

The voice of memory. What was it like? Their first meeting?

It was at an assembly, shortly before the October days. A time of restlessness. They were only a handful of Bolsheviki—but how they worked! The Mensheviki were in power, and the noisy Social Revolutionaries. The Bolsheviki were attacked from all sides, people almost used physical violence against them, the "German spies," the "traitors." Yet the group increased from day to day. They did not know themselves exactly what was to be, but they knew one thing: there must be peace come what may, and the "patriots," the "traitors," must be thrown out of the Soviets. This was certain, and they fought. Obstinately, ardently, uncompromisingly, full of faith. An unspoken resolve shone in the eyes of all: We will die, but never compromise. No one thought of himself. Did anyone consider the individual then?

Remembering this time, Vassilissa saw not herself, but only the group. The Social-Revolutionary and Menshevik papers had printed some items about her—

pure fiction, lies, slander. But let them revile her. It couldn't be otherwise. Anyway, people didn't read everything in the papers. They simply believed that justice was on the side of the Party, of the Bolsheviki.

"Have you no pity for your mother? You're disgracing the entire family! Getting mixed up with the Bolsheviki! You're selling your country to the enemy!" wept the old woman.

Unwilling to listen to such reprimands at home, Vassilissa went to live with another girl. She could not sympathize with her mother's tears. Strangers seemed closer to her. Only one goal stood clearly before her: the victory of Bolshevism. She seemed to be urged on by some force. It was impossible to stop. Though this force might hurl her into an abyss she would go on nonetheless, would struggle. She would fight. . . .

The controversy became more acute, the air more sultry. A storm was inevitable. There was news from Petrograd. The resolutions of the Congress. Trotzky's speeches. The proclamations of the Petrograd Soviets.

Then they met. The assembly was crowded, the hall was packed. People were standing on the window sills, sitting on the floor in the aisles. There was hardly room to breathe. What sort of meeting was it? Vassilissa had forgotten. For the first time a Bolshevik was elected chairman, and the committee, too, consisted of Bolsheviki and left-wing Social Revolution-

aries. Among them was an Anarchist, an Independent, known in the city as "the American"—Vladimir.

It was the first time she saw him. But she had heard much of him. Some were delighted with him, and said: "He's a real man. He knows how to make people listen to him." Others found fault with him. "A braggart." But he had the union bakers and the commercial clerks behind him. He had to be reckoned with. The Bolsheviki were glad when he scored against the Mensheviki, and were angry when he said something against them. What in the world did he want?

The Party secretary couldn't endure him. "He's crazy, we're better off without such friends." But Stephen Alexeyevitch, the most esteemed Bolshevik of the city, laughed into his gray beard as he said: "Wait a bit, be patient. He will yet become a splendid Bolshevik. He's anxious to fight. Just wait until he's lost his American spleen."

So Vassilissa had heard of him; but she paid no attention to him. So many people would pop up without anyone's knowing the least thing about them. It didn't pay to bother with them. She came late to the meeting, all out of breath. She had been speaking at the "brick-yard." There were meetings everywhere; it had to be so in those days.

She was an orator then. People liked to listen to her. Her speaking won general commendation because she was a woman, a working-girl. Vassilissa spoke

objectively, was neither wasteful nor sparing with her words. She had mastered this manner of speaking, terse, but lucid. She could hardly meet all the demands made on her.

When she came to the meeting she went directly to the platform. It had been announced that she would speak. Comrade Yurotchkin—he was dead now, killed at the front—pulled her sleeve. "We've won! The Bolsheviki won out in the election of the chairman. Two left-wing Social Revolutionaries, and the American besides. He's almost a Bolshevik now. He's going to speak in a minute."

Vassilissa glanced at the American, and something about him surprised her. So that is how an Anarchist looks! She would have thought him a gentleman. He wore a stiff collar and a tie, and his hair was parted. A handsome fellow. Long eye-lashes. His turn was just coming. He stepped forward, cleared his throat, and held his hand before his mouth. Like a gentleman, she thought, and could not help laughing.

His voice was pleasant, engaging. He spoke for a long time, frequently making his audience laugh. Vasya laughed, too. He was a smart fellow, after all, the Anarchist. Vasya applauded. When he returned to the speakers' table, he accidentally bumped against Vasya. When he turned to apologize Vasya blushed. And, embarrassed at blushing, she colored even more. It was annoying. But the Anarchist didn't notice it.

He sat down, leaned back carelessly in his chair, and smoked a cigarette.

The chairman turned to him, pointed to the cigarette. "We're not accustomed to smoking here." Shrugging his shoulders, Vladimir continued to smoke. "I want to smoke, and I will. Your rules don't apply to me." He took a few more whiffs, and, seeing that the chairman was busy with something else, threw the cigarette away.

Vasya had forgotten nothing of all this. Later she had teased Vladimir about it. But at that time he had not yet noticed her. He became aware of her only when she began to speak.

She spoke very well that evening; and though he was behind her she felt the American's eyes on her. She deliberately lauded the Bolsheviki as opposed to the Mensheviki, the Social Revolutionaries, and the Anarchists, although she didn't even know then what the Anarchists were. She wanted to strike the American; he acted too much like a gentleman.

Vasya remembered how her hair came undone as she spoke. At that time she had beautiful long hair, which she braided and wound about her head. She was speaking with all her heart, passionately, and the pins fell out of her hair. It was unpleasant, her hair was in her way, she tossed it back. She didn't know that her hair had cast a spell over Vladimir.

"I didn't see you while you were speaking. But when your hair fell over your shoulders I saw clearly

that you were no orator, but Vasya, my tomboy! A woman! And such a funny one. She was embarrassed, but held her ground. She waved her arms, and abused the Anarchists, then her hair came undone, curly little snakes were coiled on her back like threads of gold. Then, Vasyuk, I realized that I would have to know you."

Vladimir told her that later, after they had fallen in love. But she didn't know it at the meeting. After her speech was finished she began to braid her hair. Yurotchkin picked up the hair-pins for her.

"Thank you, Comrade."

It was very embarrassing; everyone was staring at her. She was afraid to look at the American. He had surely noticed, and had his own opinion of her. Something or other annoyed her; she was angry at the American. But why did she bother about him?

The meeting was over. Everybody was going away. The American stood before her.

"May I introduce myself?" He told her his name and explained who he was. He pressed her hand; praised her speech. And again Vasya flushed. They began to talk, to argue. She was for the Bolsheviki, he in favor of the Anarchists. Going with the crowd, they reached the street. It was a rainy and windy night.

A cab belonging to the Party was waiting. The American suggested that he take Vasya home. She agreed, and they climbed into the cab. It was dark in

there, and the cab was narrow. They sat close together. The horse shied, and splashed in the mud-puddles with its hoofs.

Vassilissa and Vladimir stopped disputing, sat there quiet and silent. Both grave and yet happy.

They talked about trifles, about the rain, about the meeting that would take place the next day in the soap works, about the assembly at Party Headquarters. But their hearts were full of gladness.

They were at Vasya's house, and bid each other good-night. Both were sorry that they had to part so soon, but neither said so.

"Are you sure your feet didn't get wet?" Vladimir asked anxiously.

"My feet?" Vasya was amazed, but happy about something. For the first time in her life someone had thought of her, had been concerned about her. And Vasya laughed, her regular white teeth shining. Vladimir would have liked to take her into his arms then, to kiss those moist, white, regular teeth.

The door opened; the watchman let Vasya into the house.

"Good-bye until tomorrow, at headquarters. Don't forget. The meeting opens at two sharp. We do things in the American way."

Vladimir raised his soft hat, and took his leave with a profound bow. Vasya turned in the doorway as if she were expecting something more.

The door banged, Vasya was alone in the dark little court. And suddenly the happy mood was gone. Her heart was uneasy, sick with longing. Something grieved her; something hurt her.

She seemed so small to herself. So useless.

CHAPTER III

Vasya was sitting in the car, her head pillowed on her woolen shawl. She was not sleeping, but she saw the past as in a dream, as in a moving picture: reel after reel, scene after scene, joy and misery, all her life with Vladimir, with Volodya. Beautiful memories. And as she remembered them even her sorrows seemed pleasant. She settled down more comfortably. The car rocked soothingly, luxuriously.

In her mind's eye, Vassilissa saw the meeting of the union, a noisy, shouting, restless assembly. The bakers were an obstreperous, stiff-necked, unruly crowd. Vladimir was in the chair; he alone knew how to manage them. It was difficult, but finally he succeeded. The veins of his forehead were swollen with the effort, but he had carried his point. He hadn't noticed Vasya's coming. She sat modestly beside the wall, and watched.

It was resolved to present the government with a vote of lack of confidence, and to put the union in the hands of the workers. An administrative committee of their own was elected immediately. Shareholders,

members of the municipal Duma, and *burshui* were struck off the list, and their contributions cancelled. Thenceforth the union would no longer be a municipal affair, but would belong only to the bakers and the employees of the union.

But the Mensheviki were not to be caught napping. They sent their confidential agents to notify the proper parties.

The assembly was beginning to disperse, only the administrative committee was remaining for a meeting, when suddenly, to everybody's consternation, there appeared in the doorway the Menshevik Commissar, the highest authority in the city, a follower of Kerensky. Behind him the leaders of the Mensheviki and the Social Revolutionaries. When Vladimir saw them his eyes twinkled craftily.

"Comrades, the meeting is adjourned. Only the administrative committee of the Revolutionary Bakers' Union will remain for a session. Tomorrow there will be a general meeting to discuss current affairs. Now, everybody go home!"

Vladimir's voice resounded, calm and resolute. The audience rose noisily.

"Stop, Comrades, stop!" came the irate voice of the Commissar. "I beg you not to adjourn the meeting."

"The Commissar is too late. The meeting has already been adjourned. But if you wish to acquaint yourself with our resolutions, you are welcome to

them. Here they are. We had intended to send a delegation to you. But now you have come in person. So much the better. This is as it should be in times of revolution. It's high time for the people to learn that it is not the duty of the organizations to run to the government officials with their reports, but that the officials must come to the workers' organizations for their news."

Vladimir stood there unmoved, gathered up his papers, and in his eyes, under the long lashes, the little devils were laughing and dancing.

"He's right! He's right!" cried the crowd. Many laughed. The Commissar attempted to protest. He went up to Vladimir, became excited, and shouted. Vladimir remained entirely calm, only his eyes laughed; his voice was loud and clear. His answer to the Commissar was audible throughout the hall. The public laughed and applauded. They were delighted to hear Vladimir invite the Commissar to a supper where the passage of the union from the *burshuis* to the bakers would be celebrated.

"A smart fellow, this American. He has a tongue in his head."

The Commissar had to leave without accomplishing his purpose. He threatened to use force.

"Just you try it," cried Vladimir, his eyes flashing. And the entire hall repeated. "Just you try it! Try it!" The atmosphere became threatening. The Com-

missar and his Mensheviki beat a hasty retreat through a side door.

But the tumult in the hall continued. The administrative session was postponed for the evening. People had to eat first. They were exhausted, for the meeting had been going on since morning.

Vasya went toward the door, with the crowd.

Suddenly Vladimir stood before her. Calm, his eyes laughing. How different he seemed from the others in his neat blue suit. But now she no longer saw him as a "gentleman." Today she had felt: "He belongs to us." After all, how did he differ from a Bolshevik? And he was brave, afraid of nothing. He would face bullets if necessary, in spite of his stiff collar. Suddenly there rose in Vasya not merely the thought, but the desire to lay her hand trustingly into Vladimir's strong hand. She would like to go through life with him, side by side, happily and confidently. But what was she to a man like Vladimir? Comparing herself to him, Vasya sighed. He was handsome, had seen much, had been in America.

And she? Not much to look at, ignorant; and she had never been outside her province. How could he pay any attention to her! He hadn't noticed her today either.

However, Vasya had hardly formulated these thoughts when she heard Vladimir's voice beside her: "Delighted to see you, Comrade Vassilissa. Didn't we put that Commissar's nose out of joint, though?

He won't try these tricks again. He'll never come back here. You can bank on that. Besides, we tell him of our resolutions merely as a matter of form."

Vladimir was excited, enthusiastic. Vasya caught his spirit. They began to talk, both laughed and were happy.

If his comrades hadn't come for Vladimir they would have stayed much longer in the ante-room, talking of the Commissar and the resolutions.

"Well, I must go now, I can't stay any longer, Comrade Vassilissa." Vasya heard regret in his voice. Her heart beat joyfully; she raised her tenderly observant eyes to his. Vasya's soul was mirrored in her eyes.

Vladimir looked into them. Silently, as though he were lost in them.

"Why don't you come, Comrade Vladimir? Don't keep the people waiting. We're up to our ears in work."

"I'm coming."

Hastily he pressed her hand, and left.

Vasya wandered through the city, not knowing where she was going, seeing neither streets nor people, only Vladimir.

This was something new for her.

* * * * *

A clear, frosty winter's night. Stars, countless stars, twinkling in the sky. The freshly fallen snow still

white and spotless. It covered the streets, had settled down on the roofs and barns, had bespangled the trees with its loose flakes.

Vassilissa and Vladimir were coming from a meeting. The "October Days" had come and gone. Now the power was in the hands of the Soviets. The Mensheviki and the right-wing Social Revolutionaries had been dislodged. Only the "internationalists" remained. The power of the Bolsheviki was growing. The Party ruled over all. All the workers were for the Bolsheviki. Only the *burshuis,* the popes and the army officers opposed them. The Soviet was waging a campaign against them. Life had not yet taken its proper course, the waves of the Revolution had not yet calmed down. The streets were patrolled by Red Guards; there were occasional clashes. But the worst seemed over.

Vassilissa and Vladimir were talking of the days when they had seized the power. Vladimir's bakers had stood in the gap then. Fine, resolute fellows. Vladimir was proud of them. And they had put him in the Soviet.

Vladimir and Vassilissa were walking side by side, through the quiet streets. The Red Guard patrols demanded the password. Vladimir, too, had a narrow red band on his sleeve. He was wearing a fur cap; he had enlisted in the Workers' Guard, and had been under fire. A bullet had passed through one of his cuffs; he showed it to Vasya. Though they had seen

each other a good deal during this time, they had never had a chance to talk. There was no time for that.

That day, however, they had gone out together, without any previous arrangement. They had so much to tell each other; they felt as if they were old friends meeting again to talk things over. Yet, suddenly, both were silent. They felt closer to each other. They had gone past Vasya's house without noticing it; they had reached the end of the suburb, where the truck gardens began. Where in the world had they landed! Stopping, they laughed in amazement. They looked up to the sky, where the stars were twinkling and sparkling.

"We had no clocks in our village, so we had to tell time by the stars. My father knew them particularly well. He could always tell exactly what time it was."

Vladimir spoke of his childhood. They had been a large family in a poor peasant's household. There was too little of everything. Volodya wanted to go to school, but it was too far away. So he made a bargain with the pope's daughter. He watched her geese, and she taught him to read.

Vladimir recalled his village, the fields and woods of his home. He grew tender and melancholy.

"So that's what he's like." Vassilissa was surprised.

And he became even dearer to her.

He told her about America, how he had come there as a boy, having resolved to make his own way in the world. After spending two years on board a transport, he had worked in the dockyards. Finally he was driven

away, forced to go to another state. He was starving, took any work he could get. For a time he was a waiter in a great palatial hotel. How many rich people he did see there! And as for the women! All dressed up in silks, and laces and diamonds.

Then he was a porter in a large fashionable store, where he was well paid. He wore a gallooned uniform; and he was liked because of his good figure. But he soon became sick of it. All these wealthy customers got on his nerves. He tried being a chauffeur, traveled through America with a rich cotton dealer, covered hundreds of miles in an elegant auto. However, this too became tiresome. After all, he was little better than a serf. The merchant introduced him into the cotton business, where he became a salesman, and learned book-keeping.

And then—the Revolution. Dropping everything, he hurried back to Russia. He had belonged to the organization even in America. He had been arrested once after a clash with the police. But the cotton merchant had come to his aid, for he liked him as a chauffeur, and held him in esteem although he knew him to be an Anarchist. He always shook hands with him, too. America was different from Russia!

Vladimir loved America in his way.

On and on they went, through the streets. Vasya listened; Vladimir's flow of words was inexhaustible. He seemed to be confessing his entire life to her. Again they reached the door of Vasya's house.

"Won't you invite me in for a glass of tea, Comrade Vassilissa?" asked Vladimir. "I'm parched with thirst. And I really don't want to sleep yet."

Vasya was doubtful. Her friend surely was in bed by this time.

"That doesn't make any difference. We'll wake her up. The three of us will have a real party."

And why shouldn't she ask the American to come in? She didn't want him to go away, for they had become friends.

They went in, put up the samovar, Vladimir helping.

"One must always help the ladies. That's what we do in America."

They lingered over their tea, joking, teasing Vasya's friend, whom they had pulled out of bed, because she blinked her eyes so sleepily.

And again Vladimir talked about America, about the beautiful silk-stockinged ladies who came up in their autos to the great store before which he stood in his gallooned doorman's uniform, with a feather in his three-cornered hat. One of them had slipped him a note, fixing a rendezvous. But he didn't go. He didn't care for women. They could only cause trouble. Another had given him a rose. . . .

Listening to Vladimir's stories of the beautiful American women with their silk stockings, Vasya felt more and more insignificant and unattractive.

The joy in her heart died, and the world seemed dark.

"And I suppose you fell in love with these beauties?"

Vasya's voice sounded hollow. She was chagrined at having let the question slip out.

Vladimir looked at her attentively and tenderly. He shook his head.

"All my life, Vassilissa Dementyevna, I have guarded my heart and my love. I am keeping them for a pure girl. But these fine ladies? They're much too fast, all of them. Worse than prostitutes."

And again joy flooded her heart, only to ebb again without filling it. He was keeping his heart for a pure girl? But Vasya was no longer undefiled. She had had an affair with Petya Razgulov, of the machine department, until he went to the front. Then there had been the Party organizer; she had said she was engaged to him. He, too, had gone away, had stopped writing. And she forgot him. But what to do now? Only a "pure girl"?

Vasya was looking at Vladimir, was listening to his voice, but she did not hear what he was saying. Her heart was aching so. Vladimir thought she was bored with his stories.

He stopped talking, and rose. Hastily, coldly he took his leave.

Vasya struggled against her tears. She wanted so to throw herself into his arms. But he didn't need her! He had seen so many beautiful women. And he was keeping his heart for a "pure girl."

Vasya cried all night. She determined to avoid this American. What could she mean to him?

Vasya had firmly made up her mind to keep out of the American's way, but Fate had decided to bring them even closer.

Coming to a Committee meeting one day, Vassilissa found a violent dispute in progress. A new City Commandant was to be appointed. Some proposed Vladimir, others refused to consider him. The Secretary of the Partcom was especially antagonistic. It was not to be thought of. The entire city was up in arms against the American. His *papacha* pushed to the back of his head, he rode about the town in the union cab, as though he were a governor. He irritated the people; he recognized no discipline. Fresh complaints had come in about him. He didn't follow union regulations.

Vasya defended Vladimir. It hurt her to hear him spoken of in that way, to hear him called an Anarchist. Stupid, this suspicion. Didn't he do better work than the Bolsheviki? Stepan Alexeyevitch also was in favor of Vladimir. The vote was cast.

Seven against Vladimir, six for him. Well, there was nothing to be done. After all, Vladimir was a bit to blame too. He tried to show off too much.

But Vladimir was angry. Why didn't they trust him? Wasn't he with the Revolution with all his heart and soul? When he learned of the Committee's vote he became furious. He deliberately began to insult the Bolsheviki.

"Partisans of the state! Centralists! They want to institute another police régime!"

He spoke of America, mentioned his I. W. W. wherever he could. The Committee grew excited, and demanded that Vladimir comply with the regulations. The breach widened from day to day. Vasya worked hard in Vladimir's defense, disputed till she was hoarse.

The matter was brought before the Soviet. The union had again failed to follow orders.

Vladimir, however, repeated over and over: "I don't recognize your police ordinances. Every institution is its own master. Discipline? I don't give a damn for your discipline. We didn't make the Revolution, shed blood, drive out the *burshuis* to let ourselves be chained again. Why do we need Commandants? We can command ourselves!"

Wrangling, shouting.

"If you refuse to submit we will expel you from the Soviet," threatened the presiding officer.

"Just you try it!" yelled Vladimir, his eyes flaming. "I'll recall all my bakers' boys from the militia. Who'll defend you then? Soon you'll be in the hands of the *burshuis* again. And that's where your Soviet's heading! It's no Soviet—it's a police district!"

Vassilissa's heart missed a beat. Why had he said that? Now all of them would pounce upon him. She was right. The meeting stormed with indignation. What? He had called the Soviets names? Vladimir

stood there, white-faced, defending himself. But there was a tempest round about him. People were pushing forward.

"Expel him. Arrest him. Throw him out. The blackguard!"

Thanks, Stepan Alexeyevitch. He helped him. He asked Vladimir to go into the next room. The Soviet would discuss the incident in his absence.

Vladimir went, and Vasya followed. She felt mortified. It had been so stupid of him. And she was angry at the Soviets, too. How could they condemn a man for his words? They should judge by his deeds. Everybody knew that Vladimir was on the side of the Soviet. If not for him the Bolsheviki might not have come out ahead in the October Revolution. It was he who had disarmed the officers. It was he who had forced the head of the city to flee, who had led the most obstinate of his opponents out into the street. There, shovel the snow! Why was he to be expelled from the Soviet? Because of a hasty word?

Greatly perturbed, Vasya went into the back room. Vladimir was sitting at the table, brooding, leaning his head on his hand.

As he looked up at her she saw pain, chagrin and distress in his eyes. Suddenly he seemed small and helpless as a child.

Vassilissa's heart filled with compassion. She would do anything to spare him suffering.

"Well, are the 'partisans of the state' alarmed?"

Vladimir asked pretentiously. "Did I frighten them with my threats? Things have not yet reached such a pass. . . ." He stopped short.

Vasya looked at him affectionately. There was reproach in her gaze.

"You are in the wrong, Vladimir Ivanovitch. You're harming yourself. Why did you say that? Now it looks as though you were against the Soviet."

"And I will be against it, if the Soviet is to be another police department." Vladimir still was stubborn.

"Why do you say something you don't believe yourself?" Vasya came very close to him, looked at him like a mother, gravely, tenderly. Raising his eyes to hers, Vladimir was silent.

"Admit that you lost your temper."

Vladimir bowed his head.

"I couldn't keep it back. I was furious."

And again he looked into Vasya's eyes, like a boy confessing a fault to his mother.

"Nothing to be done about it now. It's all over."

He motioned her away. But Vasya came even closer to him. Her heart was full of sorrow and tenderness. He had become so dear to her. She laid her hand on his head, stroked it.

"Don't, Vladimir Ivanovitch! Why do you lose heart? Aren't you an Anarchist? That's not the way, Vladimir! You must believe in yourself, mustn't let others bother you."

Vasya was bending over Vladimir, stroking his head

as if he were a little boy. And he leaned his head trustingly on her heart, as though he sought support in her. So big, and yet as woebegone as a child.

"I'm having such a hard time. I thought the Revolution, the Comrades—everything would change."

"And it will. But you must try doing things in a friendly, brotherly way."

"No; good will won't help now. I don't know how to deal with people."

"You'll learn. I'm sure you will."

Vasya raised Vladimir's head and looked in his eyes. His gaze, however, was anxious and troubled. Bending down, Vasya gently kissed his hair.

"We'll have to straighten out this matter. You'll have to apologize, say that you were hasty, that they misunderstood you."

"All right," Vladimir agreed obediently, seeking support in her eyes. Suddenly he threw his arms about her, crushed her to his heart until it hurt. And his burning lips clung to Vasya's mouth.

Vasya ran back to the platform, to the executive committee, directly to Stepan Alexeyevitch. Matters stood thus and thus. Vladimir Ivanovitch had to be helped out of the mess.

The incident was closed.

But the hostile attitude against Vladimir did not disappear. The Soviet was divided into two camps. The happy days of peace were over.

* * * * *

Vasya didn't want to remember more. But her thoughts flew on. There was no stopping them.

How had they come together? It was soon after the episode in the Soviet.

Vladimir was escorting her home. They always left together in those days. They were seeking each other. When they were alone their conversation was tenderly intimate.

Vasya's friend was out. And Vladimir, taking Vasya into his arms, kissed her ardently, passionately. She still remembered those kisses. But she released herself, stepped back, and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Volodya, you mustn't kiss me. I won't stand for any deception."

Amazed, he failed to understand.

"Deception? Do you think I want to deceive you? Can't you see that I've loved you ever since I've known you?"

"That's not it! That's not it, Volodya! Of course, I believe you. But, you see, I . . . I . . . No, don't kiss me. You're keeping your heart for a 'pure girl.' And I'm not a virgin any more, Volodya. I've had lovers."

As she spoke she thought, trembling: Now, my happiness is shattered.

Vladimir interrupted her. "What do I care for your lovers? You belong to me. No one can be purer than you, Vasya; your soul is pure."

Passionately, he pressed her to him.

"You love me, Vasya, don't you? Don't you love me? Don't you belong to me? To me? And to no one else. And look here—don't you ever again mention your lovers. Don't tell me anything. I don't want to know anything. I don't want to. You belong to me, and that's the end of it."

This was the beginning of their union.

MENAGE

CHAPTER IV

The compartment was dark. The Nep-girl had gone to bed, after perfuming the entire car with Eau de Cologne. Vassilissa was lying quietly in her upper berth. If only she could fall asleep. But memories of the past insisted upon coming up. As if she were settling her accounts. But why settle them? All her life was still before her. Love and happiness awaited her. Yet somewhere, in an obscure corner of her heart, Vasya felt that things weren't as they used to be. The happiness of four years ago was gone. Their love had changed, and Vassilissa, too, was different.

Why? Whose fault was it?

Her hands folded beneath her head, Vassilissa lay there, thinking. In all these years she had never had time to think. She had lived and worked. But now she had a feeling of having forgotten or neglected something. Why? Dissension within the Party; trouble in the institutions.

Everything had been different then. Volodya, too, had been different. True, she had had her hands full with him. He would fall out with the authorities. But Vasya always was able to reason with him. He trusted her, and always followed her advice.

The Whites commenced their offensive; the city was in danger. Vladimir decided to enlist for the front. And Vasya did not hold him back. She only tried to persuade him to join the Party before he left. He resisted at first. But finally gave in.

Thus he became a Bolshevik, and went away.

They corresponded very little. Now and then he would come back for a day or two. And then more weeks and months of separation. As if it had to be so. They didn't even miss each other very much—there was no time for such things. Then Vasya learned, at a Committee meeting, that a charge was being pressed against Vladimir. What could that mean? He was working for the artillery, and they said he wasn't managing his affairs properly, that he wasn't entirely straight and aboveboard.

Vasya flared up. That wasn't true. She didn't believe it. It was a conspiracy, or slanderous gossip.

She rushed out to find out more. It seemed a serious affair. The case had not yet been brought into court, but he had been removed from his post. She begged Stepan Alexeyevitch to bring about her transfer to a transport train bearing gifts to the front. And in three days she was on her way.

It was very hard to get through. Delays everywhere. The trains missed one another. There was something wrong with the papers. The gift-bearing car wasn't coupled on. She was exhausted and worried. The case might already have come to court.

Only then did Vasya realize how she loved Vladimir, how much he meant to her. And she trusted him, as much as it was possible to trust anyone. The more others suspected him, for they felt that an Anarchist was capable of anything, the more vigorously she defended him. No one knew his heart as well as she, Vasya. And his heart was tender as a woman's. His harshness and obstinacy were only on the surface. Vasya knew that kindness and gentleness could always lead him on the right path.

But it was true that he had become embittered. The life of the proletarians was hard.

Finally Vassilissa reached headquarters, where, after much difficulty, she learned where Vladimir lived. She was forced to walk all the way across the town, in a pouring rain. It was a good thing that a Comrade went with her. She was tired, shivering with the cold. But she was glad, for now she knew that the investigation was not yet over. There was no evidence; opinions varied within the army itself. Rumors and denunciations were current. Vasya was confused only by the disagreeable smile with which people looked at her, by their air of hiding something when she openly called herself his wife. She had to try to understand everything. And then she would have to go to Comrade Toporkoff, of the Central Administration. He knew Vladimir and his work. This prosecution would have to stop. Why did they harass him? Others, too, had once been Mensheviki or Social-Revolutionaries,

but no one hounded them. Why was an Anarchist worse than they?

They reached the little wooden house where Vladimir lived. The windows were lighted, but the door was locked. The Comrade knocked. No answer. Vasya's feet were soaked to the ankle; her clothes were wet, and she was cold. She was thinking not of the joy of seeing Vladimir again, but only of getting into the warm room as soon as possible to change her dress and stockings. She had been sitting in the heated baggage car for five days, had had practically no sleep.

"Let's knock on the window," suggested the Comrade.

He broke off a birch rod, tapped on the window with it.

Someone pulled back the curtain, and Vasya saw Volodya's head. He seemed to be wearing only a shirt. As he strained his eyes to see in the dark, a woman's head bobbed up from behind his shoulder, only to disappear again.

Vasya felt her heart sinking. A sharp, sickening pain.

"Why don't you open the door, Comrade? I've brought you your wife."

The curtain was drawn, hiding Volodya and the woman. Vasya and her companion mounted the steps leading to the door. They waited. Why did it take so long? To Vasya the time seemed endless.

At last the door opened. Vladimir took Vasya in

his arms, pressing her to him and kissing her. His face was radiant, his eyes wet with tears.

"You came! You came to me! My friend, Vasya! My comrade!"

"Take her things, at least," grumbled her escort. "What'll I do with them?"

"Come right into the house! We'll have some supper. You must be soaked through and freezing."

They entered the house. It was bright and clean. A dining room, with a bedroom behind it. At the dining room table sat a nurse with a white kerchief about her neck and a red badge on her sleeve. She was pretty. Vasya felt another stab at her heart. Volodya introduced the two.

"This is Sister Barbara. My wife, Vassilissa Dementyevna."

They shook hands and looked at each other searchingly, as if each wanted to sound the other.

"What's the matter, Vasya? Take off your wraps. Aren't you the lady of this house? See how well I live here. Better than in your little room. Let me have your coat. How wet it is. We must hang it up next to the stove."

The nurse had remained standing.

"Well, Vladimir Ivanovitch, we'll let our business discussions go until tomorrow. I don't want to disturb your domestic bliss tonight."

She shook hands with Vasya and Vladimir, and went out together with Vasya's escort.

Vladimir picked up Vasya and carried her about the room. He fondled her, kissed her, was beside himself with joy.

Vasya's heart felt less heavy, and she was ashamed of herself. Still she asked, casually, between kisses: "Who was that nurse?" And she bent back her head the better to look into Vladimir's eyes.

"The nurse? She came to see me about the provisioning of the hospital. Deliveries must be made more quickly. There are delays along the line. They can't get along without me, though they made me stop my work. As soon as something goes wrong, they come to me."

He turned the conversation to the charges against him, spoke of the thing that worried them both. He set Vasya down, and they went into the bedroom. Once more Vasya felt that stab. The bed was untidily made, as if someone had hurriedly thrown the covers over it.

She glanced at Vladimir. Placing his hands on his back, a gesture Vasya knew and loved, he paced up and down the room. He told her of his case, what had happened, how it had begun.

Listening, Vasya suffered for him. She felt clearly that it was all envious gossip. Her Volodya's hands were clean. She was convinced of that; it could not be otherwise.

She took a pair of stockings from her suit-case. But she had no other shoes. What to do?

Vladimir noticed it.

"That's how you are! You haven't even an extra pair of shoes. Of course I can get some leather, and our cobbler will make a pair for you, as a special favor. But now let me take off your shoes. How wet they are."

He drew off her shoes, threw Vasya's wet stockings on the floor, took her cold feet into his warm hands.

"What tiny feet you have. Like a doll. Oh, Vasyuk mine, my darling." Bending down, he kissed her feet.

"What are you doing, Volodyka? You silly boy." She laughed; her heart was joyful again.

* * * * *

They drank tea, talked and held council. Vladimir told her everything. How he had been rude at the wrong time, how he had disregarded instructions and had done things his own way. He couldn't stand orders. He told her of the times when he had furthered the cause, and of the "undesirables" he had employed. But as for being light-fingered, Vasya surely could not believe that of him. Vladimir stood before her, choking with rage.

"So you, too, could think that of me? You, Vasya?"

"No, no, Volodya. I was only afraid that your accounts might be a bit muddled. They're so strict nowadays."

"You needn't worry about my accounts. Those who started this business will find their finish in it. My accounts are clear as crystal. The bookkeeping I learned in America has come in handy."

Vassilissa felt a load off her heart. All that was necessary now was to meet the Comrades, consult with them, and explain the how, when, and where.

"It was so clever of you to come here," said Vladimir. "I didn't dare expect you. I know how hard you work, and assumed you'd be too busy for your husband, for your Volodyka."

"Why, don't you know that I have no peace when you're not with me? I'm always worrying: what's he doing? How does he feel? Has anything happened to him?"

"You're my guardian angel, Vasya. I know that." He spoke very gravely, and kissed Vasya. His eyes became sad and thoughtful. "I'm not worthy of you, Vasya. I love only you. I love you above all things. You believe me, don't you? I love you, love you. No one but you. Anything else is absurd. . . ."

Here Vasya didn't understand him. His unusual vehemence, his agitation puzzled her.

They went into the bedroom. It was time to go to sleep. Intending to make the bed, Vasya threw back the covers. What was that? Her temples pounded, her knees trembled. A woman's bandage—a blood-stain on the sheet.

"Volodya! What's that?" Her voice faltered. She moaned.

Vladimir rushed to the bed, savagely threw the bandage to the floor.

"That hussy, that landlady of mine. She lay down here again when I was out. Soiled the bed." He threw the sheets on the floor.

"Vladimir."

Wide-eyed, Vasya stood before him. Her look said everything.

Vladimir gazed at her and remained silent.

"Why that, Volodya? Why?"

Wringing his hands, Volodya threw himself on the bed.

"It's all over. It's all over. But I swear to you, Vasya, I love only you, only you."

"Why did you do it? Why didn't you think of our love?"

"I'm young, Vasya. All alone for months. And they're forever running after you, these common hussies. I hate them all. All of them. These filthy women."

He stretched out his arms toward her. Tears were rolling down his cheeks, large, burning tears.

"You must understand, Vasya. You must. Or I can't live. You must pity me. Life is so hard."

Vasya bent down and kissed his head, as in the Soviet, long before. And again she pitied him, again she was filled with compassion for this big, helpless,

childlike man. Who would understand him if not she? Even now everyone was ready to throw stones at him. Should she really drop him because he had hurt her? Had she not once been ready to bear the brunt of every blow destined for him? A poor thing, her love, if she would leave him the first time he had made her suffer.

Bending over Vladimir, Vasya silently stroked his hair, seeking a way out.

Someone knocked at the door, a harsh, commanding knock. What was that?

They exchanged a glance, and both understood. A hurried embrace, a passionate kiss, and they went into the hall. They had guessed right.

The investigation had been closed, and Vladimir was arrested. The ground seemed to be trembling beneath Vasya's feet.

Vladimir remained calm. He collected his things, told Vasya where to find his papers, whom to summon as witnesses, who could give her information. Then they took him away.

That was years ago, but Vasya would never forget that night. She had never lived through anything more dreadful than that night.

Her heart was racked with twofold pain. The century-old, insurmountable suffering of woman, and the distress of the friend, the comrade, at the wrong done her beloved, at the malevolence of men, at the injustice of the world.

Vasya walked about the bedroom as though she were mad. She could not rest.

Here, before she came, in this room, on this bed Vladimir had loved, kissed, embraced the other woman. That pretty woman with the full lips and the voluptuous bosom. Might he not love her? Might he not have lied to Vassilissa, out of pity?

She wanted the truth, the truth only. Why had they taken away Vladimir just then? If only he had been there she would have found out everything, would have asked him. If only he had been there, she would have freed herself of her own agonizing thoughts, would have been consumed with pity for him.

Her woman's heart was aching. And she grew furious at Vladimir. How had he dared do such a thing? He would never have taken another woman if he had loved her. And if he didn't love her, he should have told her so frankly, instead of torturing her with his lies.

Vassilissa paced from one corner to the other. She could not rest.

And suddenly a new thought pierced her heart. Suppose the charges against Vladimir really were to be taken seriously? Suppose there really was a reason for his arrest? Suppose the "undesirables," the scoundrels, had got him into trouble, leaving the entire responsibility on his shoulders?

Her heartache was forgotten, forgotten the red-lipped nurse. Now she was only trembling with an

agonizing fear for Vladimir, racked and crushed by her suffering for him. They had robbed him of his reputation, had ruthlessly arrested him. Those were his Comrades.

Compared to that, what was her feminine grief? What had they done to her beloved Vladimir—his own Comrades? She felt hurt not at his having been with the woman, but at the failure of even the Revolution to bring an era of truth and justice.

Vassilissa forgot her weariness as if her body had disappeared. Only her soul remained, her heart, torn by the sharp claws of her harrowing thoughts. She waited for the morning, and with the morning came the resolve to fight for Vladimir. They should not touch him. She would liberate him from those envy-filled schemers. Single-handed she would convince everyone that he was stainless. Their slanders were false, false their libelous attacks on his good name.

CHAPTER V

Early that morning a Red Guard brought her a note from Volodya.

"Vasya, my wife, my beloved comrade. I don't care about the case against me now. Let them ruin me. Only one thought torments me, maddens me—that I might lose you. I can't live without you, Vasya. You must know that. If you no longer love me, make no efforts in my behalf. Let them shoot me. Yours, only yours——Volodya."

And on the side, diagonally, "I love only you. Whether you believe me or not. And I will insist on it until I die."

Another sentence, in a corner, "I've never re-reproached you with your past. Try to understand and forgive me now. Yours, with all my heart and soul."

Vasya read the note over and over, and felt happier. He was right. He had never reproached her that she had not been a virgin.

After all, men were like that. What could he do when that hussy threw herself on his neck? Act like a monk?

She read the note again, kissed it, folded it carefully,

and put it in her pocket. And now to get busy, to get Volodya out of trouble.

She wore herself out, rushing from pillar to post, growing excited, running afoul of bureaucracy and the indifference of men, giving up, losing all hope. Then, summoning all her strength, she began to fight with renewed courage. She would not permit the triumph of the wrong, she would not let those scheming slanderers worst Volodya.

She gained her most important point. Comrade Toporkov took the matter in his own hands. And after looking into it he made the following decision: "As the charges are groundless, the case is to be dropped. Zviridov and Malitchenko are to be arrested."

The next morning Vasya could not leave her bed. She had contracted typhus. In the evening she recognized no one, not even Volodya, when he returned.

In her memory Vasya's illness seemed a dull dream. It was night when she regained consciousness. She looked about. An unfamiliar room, medicine bottles on the table, a nurse with a white neckerchief sitting beside her bed. Wiry, no longer young, a severe expression on her face. As Vasya looked at her, it bothered her to see a nurse sitting there. The white kerchief irritated her. Why? She hardly knew herself.

"Would you like a drink?" Leaning forward, the nurse held a glass to her lips.

Vasya drank, and lost consciousness again. Vaguely, as in a dream, she felt Volodya bending over her and adjusting her pillow. She became entirely unconscious. She had a dream; perhaps it was real? There were two shadows in the room; no, not shadows—women, but not real women. One white, one gray. Turning, twisting, their arms entwining. Not a dance, but a struggle. And now Vasya understood. Life and Death had come to her, were fighting for her. Which would win?

Vasya was frightened, so frightened that she wanted to scream. But she could not utter a sound. This frightened her even more. Her heart beat, pounded, as though it would burst any moment. Ping. Ping. Ping. There was shooting on the street.

She opened her eyes. In the feeble light of the night-lamp she saw that she was alone. It was night. She listened. A scratching—mice—as if they were rolling something under the floor. Ever nearer, ever closer. And now Vasya was torn by a new fear. She felt that the mice were trying to get on her bed, on her. And she would not be able to drive them away.

Beginning to cry, she called feebly: "Volodya. Volodya. Volodya."

"Vasya darling. My little sweetheart. What's the matter?"

Volodya was bending over her, anxiously peering into her eyes.

"Volodya, are you alive? Really?" Her strengthless hand felt about Volodya's head.

"I'm alive. We're both alive, my dearest. Why are you crying? What's the matter with my Vasyuk? Were you dreaming? Are you delirious again?"

Tenderly he kissed her hands and stroked her damp short hair.

"No, no, I wasn't dreaming. The mice were scratching so. . . . " she defended herself, with a faint smile.

"The mice?" Volodya laughed. "My Vasyuk has become so brave that it's afraid of mice! I told the nurse that you shouldn't be left alone. It's a good thing I came home just now."

Vasya would have liked to ask him where he had been. But she was so weak that she couldn't talk. A delicious weakness, however, a sort of drowsiness. And the nicest part of it all was his sitting beside her. She held his hand in her feeble grasp, would not let go.

Her smiling lips whispered: "He's alive."

"Of course, I'm alive," laughed Vladimir. Gently he kissed her forehead.

Vasya opened her eyes. "But what happened to my hair? Did they cut it off?"

"That's nothing. Don't worry about that. Now you're a real boy, a real Vasyuk."

Vasya smiled. She was happy.

Volodya did not leave her. As she dozed he sat on the chair beside her and watched over her sleep.

"Sleep, Vasya, sleep. You musn't look at me with your big eyes. You'll have plenty of time to look at me when you're well again. If you don't sleep now you'll be sick again, and the doctor'll scold me. He'll tell me I'm a poor nurse."

"You won't go away?"

"Where would I go? I sleep here every night, on the floor beside you. I'm less worried when I'm able to see you. In the daytime I'm working hard."

"Working? In the commissariat?"

"Yes, indeed. Everything's all right again. Those rogues have been arrested. But you're not to talk, you impossible Vasyuk. Sleep. If you don't go to sleep, I'll go away."

Her helpless fingers tightened their hold on his hand. But she closed her eyes quite submissively.

It was so wonderful, so sweet to fall asleep with Volodya sitting beside her, looking at her so anxiously and tenderly.

"My darling. . . ."

"You must sleep, you bad, naughty boy."

"I'm asleep. But I love you."

Volodya bent over her and kissed her eyelids, long, very gently, tenderly.

And Vasya could have wept with joy. She was willing to die right then and there. No greater happiness could ever be hers.

* * * * *

The memory of what she had felt then made Vasya start. Was such a thing impossible now? Had her heart been right when it told her that she could never know greater happiness?

And now that joy, that happiness would be no more. She was going to him, to her beloved. He had asked for her, was waiting for her. He had sent a comrade to tell her to hurry. And he had sent her money for the trip. And a dress. So he must love her. Why, then, would she never be so happy again? Vasya wanted so much to believe in her happiness; but doubt rankled in her breast. She had no real faith.

In a brown study, Vasya again thought of the past. They had parted quite suddenly that time. The front was shifted. When Vladimir went away, Vasya still was so weak that she could hardly walk. They parted on the best of terms. The nurse was not mentioned again. Vasya had come to understand that the nurse had meant no more to him than a glass of whiskey. "You drink it, and it's forgotten."

Vasya had gone back home, and immediately returned to her work.

At that time she believed that everything was as it had been, that everything was all right again. Now Vasya remembered that even then there had been a load on her heart. Something, somewhere, was raising its head. Was it bitterness because of the red-lipped nurse, or was it suspicion? Yet Vasya loved Volodya.

The fear they had shared, and her illness had bound them even closer together. They had loved each other before, too; but they had not felt so near to each other. Now, after the distress they had gone through together, their hearts were more united. Still, Vasya could no longer find the joy of a bright spring morning in her love. It had become gloomier, overcast with clouds. Yet it had grown deeper and stronger.

Besides, how could one have been in the mood for love and joy?

There were the fronts, the partings, the conspiracies, the mobilization of the Communists. They were threatened from all sides, were head over heels in work. Working in the Housing Bureau of the Soviet, Vasya had to take care of the refugees. It was there that she had developed her idea of organizing a community house to conform with her views. Stepan Alexeyevitch had helped her with word and deed. And Vasya had plunged into her work.

She lived thus for months. Of course she thought of Vladimir, always had him in her heart. But she did not have much time to yearn for him. And he too had his work. Everything seemed to be running along smoothly. He had stopped trying to show off so much, and was at peace with the "Executive."

Suddenly he surprised Vasya in her attic. Quite unexpectedly. He had been wounded in a skirmish during the retreat. Nothing dangerous, but he needed

a rest. He was given leave, and had come to board with his wife.

Vasya was glad. Yet she could not help thinking: Why just now? Could it not have been two months before, or a month later? Vasya was so worried just then, and overwhelmed with work. A Congress was in session at the moment, and the Housing Bureau was being reorganized. She was fighting for her community house. Impossible to tell when the work would be finished. She had almost had to tear herself in two. And now Volodya was there, wounded, in need of care. How would she manage?

Troubled, she could not be really happy.

Vladimir, however, was delighted as a child.

He had brought her a pair of shoes, keeping the promise he had made on her first day in his house.

"Put them on, Vasya. I want to see how your little doll's feet look in them."

Vassilissa had no time. There was a meeting of the Housing Bureau. But she did not want to hurt Vladimir.

She put them on, and felt that she saw her feet for the first time. They really looked like a doll's.

Radiant with joy she looked at Volodya—she even forgot to thank him.

"I want so much to pick you up, Vasyutka. But I can't, on account of my hand. I love your little feet. And your brown eyes."

Vladimir was content, excited and happy. He talked and joked.

But Vasya, who should have been at the meeting long before, listened only half-heartedly. She glanced at the alarm clock beside the little mirror on her dresser. The minutes were slipping away. They were waiting for her at the meeting. They would be angry. She was keeping everybody waiting, and it wasn't proper for the chairman to be late.

Vassilissa came back home late, toward evening. She was tired. There had been unpleasant incidents. She was worried.

Climbing the stairs to her attic she thought, "It's nice, after all, to have Volodya there. I'll talk over my troubles with him."

But when she entered the room Volodya wasn't there. Where might he be? His cap was there, his coat was hanging in its proper place.

He had probably gone out for a moment. She cleaned up the room, and put the teakettle on the petroleum burner. But Volodya had not come back.

Where could he be? She went out into the hall—he was not in sight. She waited, grew worried.

Again she went into the hall. There was Vladimir, coming out of the Fedosseyevs' apartment. They were laughing, parting like the best of friends. Why had Volodya gone to them? He knew of their duplicity.

"At last you've come back, Vasya. Your cage depressed me so, I was ready to hang myself. All alone

the livelong day. I was glad to meet Comrade Fedosseyev. He took me along with him."

"Don't have anything to do with them, Volodya. You know they're always scheming."

"You wouldn't ask me to die of boredom in your cage? Don't run away for the whole day, then I won't go to the Fedosseyevs."

"But I have work to do. I'd be only too glad to come home to you earlier, but I can't. It's impossible."

"Of course, you're busy. But how did I manage to sit beside you at night when you had typhus? And I used to get away in the daytime too, to look after you. I came to you on sick leave, Vasya. I still have some fever."

Vasya heard the reproach in his voice. He was offended at her having been away all day. But what could she do? There was the reorganization of her department, the coming Congress.

"I believe you're not overjoyed to have me here," Vladimir said. "I didn't think I'd find you like this."

"How can you say such a thing? I'm not glad? I? My dearest. My beloved. My sweetheart."

She threw herself into his arms. They almost upset the petroleum burner.

"There, there. And I was ready to think you had stopped loving me. That you might have someone else. You seemed so cold, so indifferent. Even your eyes were strange. Not at all tender."

"I'm so tired, Volodya. I've no energy left. . . ."

"You're my tireless little tomboy!" Pressing Vassilissa to him, Vladimir kissed her.

* * * * *

Thus they lived together in their "cage" in the attic. In the beginning they managed. Although Vasya found it hard to devote herself to both her work and her man, she was happy nonetheless.

There always was someone to talk to, to advise her, to sympathize with her when she was disappointed, to help her plan for the future.

But the housekeeping was a nuisance. Vladimir had become accustomed to good food at the front. But Vasya's household? She brought her dinner from the public kitchen. She had no sugar with her tea, but only rock-candy. For the first few days they lived on the groceries Vladimir had brought.

"I've brought you some food: flour, sugar, sausage. For I know how you live, like a sparrow under the gables, without a bite to eat in the house."

When they had used up Volodya's provisions, however, they were dependent on the public kitchen. And Volodya didn't like it. He grumbled: "Why are you forever feeding me millet and millet gruel? I'm no rooster."

"There's nothing else to be had. I have to live on my ration."

"What are you talking about! The Fedosseyevs have no more than you, but yesterday they served me a real dinner, and a wonderful one at that. Fried potatoes and herring and onions."

"Fedosseyeva has the time for housekeeping. But I—don't you see that I'm wearing myself out without attending to anything but my affairs?"

"You've undertaken too much. That's the trouble. Why do you bother about this community house? The Fedosseyevs were saying. . . ."

"I know what the Fedosseyevs are saying!" exploded Vasya. She was hurt at Vladimir's associating with her enemies. "And you're not acting like a comrade when you listen to them, and join them against me."

They quarreled. Both lost their tempers. Then both were ashamed of themselves, and they made peace. Vasya, however, grew more worried over her inability to take better care of her man. He had come to her, wounded, and she had offered him food from the public kitchen. He had taken better care of her the other time, and he had brought her a pair of shoes.

It grieved her to see Voloyda eating nothing. He would swallow two or three spoonfuls of soup, and would push away the plate.

"I'd rather go hungry than eat this dishwater. Make some tea, and try to get some bread somehow or other. I'll send you some flour later, from the front, so you'll be able to return it."

Impossible to go on that way. She had to find some way out.

Vasya hurried to the meeting. But her head was a jumble of resolutions and millet gruel. What could she give Volodya for dinner?

If only she had time she would find a way, would think, and prepare something.

She was delighted to meet her cousin on the way. Just at the right time. The cousin had a daughter, a lively, capable girl just out of school. Now she was living with her parents, had no definite occupation, but was helping her mother with the housework. Her name was Styosha.

There was no difficulty about the arrangements. Styosha would spend the day with them and keep house. In exchange, Vasya would share her *payok* with her cousin. A load off her mind, Vasya hurried on to her meeting. Tomorrow Volodya would have decent meals.

Styosha proved to be capable. And she got along well with Volodya. They kept house together, exchanged some of their supplies, while Volodya received a number of things from the union for old times' sake. Vasya was content. Volodya no longer complained about the food. But now he had another grievance against her.

"You take care of everybody, but I mean nothing to you."

Again Vasya was distressed. Thus was she torn back and forth between Volodya and her work. But why had he come at such a feverish time?

She tried to explain to Vladimir. But he was angry, pretended not to understand.

"You've grown so cold, Vasya. You've even forgotten how to kiss."

"I'm so tired, Volodya. All my energy's gone," was her excuse.

But Volodya was angry. Vasya herself realized that things couldn't go on that way. Here her lover had come to visit her, after an endlessly long time, and she was gone all day, working, returning only late at night, dead tired, scarcely able to tumble into bed. How could she think of kissing!

There were painful incidents. One evening Volodya began to caress her. But she fell asleep the moment her head touched the pillow.

The next morning Vladimir teased her. Where was the fun in petting a lifeless body? He was laughing, but she saw that he was offended. She too felt unhappy about it, felt that she was to blame. He could really believe that she no longer loved him. But where was she to get the energy for everything?

One day Vasya came home earlier than usual.

Vladimir was preparing the dinner for himself.

"What's the matter? Where is Styosha?"

"Your Styosha is a little devil. I threw her out.

If she dares to show her face here again I'll throw her down four flights of stairs."

"Why, what happened? What did she do?"

"Take my word for it, she's a devil. I wouldn't have chased her away for nothing. I don't have to tell you the whole story. You'll only get excited. She's a vulgar, filthy creature. I don't want to see any trace of her here."

Vasya saw that he was furious at Styosha, and determined to ask no more questions. She probably had stolen something, she thought. Such things often happened. And Vladimir was very strict about his things. Though he was very liberal otherwise, and always glad to share what he had with his comrades, yet he had that possessive instinct. Let anyone dare take something of his without his permission. He'd never forgive him.

"What'll become of our household?"

"Let the house go to the devil! I'll go to the hotel. And I've found some friends. I won't starve!"

Styosha went to see Vasya in the Housing Bureau, demanded her *payok*.

"What happened between you and Vladimir Ivanovitch, Styosha? What did you do?"

"I didn't do a thing." Styosha's eyes flashed as she pushed her comb more firmly into her hair. "Your Vladimir Ivanovitch always was fresh to me, so I slapped his face good and hard for him. He spit blood for quite a while. And he won't try it again."

"How silly you are, Styosha. Vladimir Ivanovitch was only playing with you."

Vasya was trying to remain calm, but her head was swimming.

"A nice sort of play that was. Why, he had me down on the bed! It's a good thing that I'm strong. No one can have me against my will."

Vasya tried to convince Styosha that it had all been meant playfully, as a joke, and that now Vladimir Ivanovitch was really cross with her. But Styosha looked more stubborn. What was the difference what it was all about. She would never cross that threshold again.

Gloom enveloped Vasya's heart. She didn't blame Volodya, didn't even feel hurt. It was her own fault, after all. Why was she so cold? She had offended Volodya. He might actually believe that she no longer loved him. But this was nasty. Why had he touched the girl? Styosha was barely out of her childhood. It was a good thing that she knew life. What might not have happened otherwise? The incident preyed on Vasya's mind. She was undecided as to whether she should tell Vladimir that she knew everything, or whether she should remain silent.

But Vasya had no more opportunity of talking with Vladimir.

A new order was inaugurated. Vladimir hunted up his old friends, the employes of the union. He disappeared for days at a time. They never saw each

other. In the morning, when Vasya went to the Housing Bureau, Volodya was still sound asleep. When she stopped in during the day he wasn't there. When she came home at night the attic was still empty.

Vasya would be nervous. She didn't know whether she should go to bed or wait to have tea with him. She heated her supper on the petroleum burner, arranged her papers for the morning, listened to the steps in the hall.

That wasn't Vladimir.

She put out the fire, for economy's sake, and took up her papers again. She looked over reports, sorted petitions. Someone was hurrying up the stairs. Was it he? No, it wasn't Vladimir.

Vasya would go to bed alone, would soon be sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. But even in her sleep she would listen. It was so cold and dreary without him.

Sometimes he would be merry when he came home; he would wake up Vasya, and make love to her. He would be burning to tell her everything, would have thousands of plans up his sleeve.

Then Vasya would feel so happy, so content. All her troubles would disappear.

Sometimes, however, Vladimir wasn't entirely sober when he came; walking heavily, he would look about him scowling, with watery eyes. He was full of self-reproach on these occasions, but he blamed Vassilissa too. What a life! In a cage, under the roof! No

pleasure, no diversions—a woman, and yet not a woman! And they had no child.

This, particularly, stabbed Vasya. Although she had not wanted a child, she would have liked to have one for his sake. But it seemed impossible. She never became pregnant. Other women wept and wailed because of their inability to avert the flood of children. But it seemed that she, Vasya, was to be denied the joys of motherhood.

"Anemia," was the doctor's opinion.

In order to cheer up Vasya, Vladimir decided to take her to the theatre; he procured the tickets.

Vasya came home at the appointed time. Vladimir was preening himself before the mirror. He had put on fine clothes, and looked like a "gentleman" again. Laughing, Vasya teased him. She loved her handsome man.

"And what'll you put on?" He looked at her anxiously. "Haven't you a Sunday dress?"

Vasya laughed again. What in the world was a Sunday dress? He must have learned that in America, where people dress up in a different outfit every day. She would put on a clean blouse, and the new shoes Volodya had brought her. That was all her finery.

Vladimir looked cross. He scowled at her so that she grew frightened.

"Do you think people will look only at your feet in the theatre? And the rest of your clothes can be sackcloth?"

"I don't understand why you're angry, Volodya."

"How can one help being angry at these organizers of ours! They've arranged our lives as if we were in prison. Here you've no real amusement, no real home, no decent dress! You have to live in a cage, drink water, eat garbage and wear coarse clothes! Why, I was better off when I was out of work in the United States!"

"But you can't expect everything at once. You know—the collapse."

"Don't talk to me about the collapse. What sort of organizers have we, anyhow? They've torn down everything with their own hands, but if anyone wants to do something constructive they shout: 'Do you want to become *burshuis?* Hands off!'

"No, you don't know how to live! That's why everything goes to pieces. I'm sure I didn't go through the Revolution to lead such a life!"

"Why, the Revolution wasn't for us!"

"For whom, then?"

"For everybody."

"The *burshuis,* too?"

"Don't be silly! Of course not for the *burshuis*! For the workers, the proletariat!"

"And what do you think we are? Not workers, not proletariat?"

They disputed and disputed, almost coming late to the theatre.

Through the streets they went, through the slush

of spring. Vladimir walking ahead silently, with huge steps, so that Vasya barely could follow.

"Don't run so, Volodya. I'm all out of breath."

Suddenly he stopped and waited. After that he walked more slowly, but still refused to say a word.

In the theatre, Vladimir met some friends, with whom he spent the intermissions. And Vasya had to sit alone.

The theatre gave her no pleasure. Why had she wasted the evening? Now, she would have to work twice as hard in the morning.

* * * * *

The Congress opened shortly before Vladimir's departure. He attended it, although he was not a delegate. There was wrangling; antagonistic groups were formed. Vladimir was on Vasya's side. Leaving his friends, he worked for her group wholeheartedly. Now Vasya and Vladimir became inseparable. They went to and from the Congress together, discussed their stand at home. The Comrades of her group crowded Vasya's room. They drew up resolutions. Vladimir wrote on the typewriter they had procured. Everyone was working swiftly, hurriedly; they seemed welded together. They would become agitated, would quarrel. Then they would laugh again, for no reason but their youth. They liked the battle for its own sake. It kept their minds off their troubles.

Stepan Alexeyevitch was there too, sitting at the table and stroking his fine gray beard. His genial, animated eyes watched youth. Vassilissa was always whispering about something with him. He spoke very highly of her, said she was above the average. But he seemed rather cool toward Vladimir. Vasya was sorry to see it. Why this attitude? Vladimir, too, was distant in his manner.

"Your Stepan Alexeyevitch is too oily for me. He smells of incense. He's no Communist fighter. Just a toady, that's all."

Vasya's faction was defeated. But she had received more votes than she had expected. That, too, was a victory.

As the Congress was drawing to a close, the time of Vladimir's departure approached. Again Vasya was torn in two. She had to equip him for his trip, and the Congress was still going on.

But deep down in her heart Vasya was glad. Once more she had felt that her man was not only her lover, but her friend. She was proud of him, for he had been a great help to her group. The Comrades wouldn't let him go.

"Now good-bye, my Vasyuk. My little sparrow will stay all alone under its gable. Now it won't have anyone to tell its troubles to. But to make up for that no one'll disturb you in your work."

"Did you ever bother me?" She embraced him, fondled him.

"Didn't you say yourself that your man was taking up your time? Didn't you complain about the housekeeping?"

"Oh, don't talk of that. It's much worse without you."

And she hid her head against his breast.

"You're not only my sweetheart, but my comrade, too. That's why I love you."

They parted tenderly, on the best of terms.

After seeing off Vladimir she hurried back to the Congress, thinking: no matter how nice it is to be together, you're better off alone. The presence of your lover distracts your thoughts, makes your work progress too slowly.

Now she could again devote herself entirely to her work. Work and rest. She had never had enough sleep when he was there.

"Did you see your husband off?" Stepan Alexeyevitch asked her at the Congress.

"Yes, Vladimir has gone."

"That's better for you. He only got you into debt."

Vasya was amazed. How had Stepan Alexeyevitch known? But she did not answer. If she had admitted it her lover's prestige might have suffered.

CHAPTER VI

The train was to arrive in the morning. And Vassilissa was up with the first pale light of dawn. She had to collect her things, and dress, to please her beloved Volodya. They had been hard, those seven months of separation.

Vassilissa was happy, gay, joyful. She felt the spring in the air.

The Nep-girl was still in bed, lying on her back, and gazing at her reflection in a hand mirror. But Vasya had already washed herself, carefully brushed her curls, and put on the new dress Grusha had made for her. Vassilissa looked into the mirror on the wall. She saw only her eyes. They sparkled so that her entire face looked beautiful.

Everything seemed to be allright. This time Volodya wouldn't lecture her for running around in "rags."

A station. Vassilissa looked out the window. It was early in the morning, the sun was shining. In the North one could hardly see that it was spring, but here everything was in bloom. The trees, too, were full of flowers. Strange, very odd trees. Leaves like those of the black alder, but more delicate in color;

and the boughs covered with white blossoms, resembling lilac blossoms; but they were not lilacs. Their perfume, sweet and very strong, was pouring in through the window.

"What sort of tree is that?" Vasya asked the conductor. "We don't have them in our country."

"White acacias."

"White acacias? They're pretty." The conductor broke off a few branches and gave them to Vasya.

How sweet their scent was. And Vasya was so happy that she was almost in tears. Everything about her was so beautiful, so fascinating. But the most important thing: "In another hour, I'll see Volodya."

"Will we be there soon?" Again Vasya turned to the conductor. To her it seemed that the train wasn't moving at all. It had stopped again, at a siding. At last it moved on.

Now the city was in sight. The cathedrals. The barracks. The suburbs. The platform of the station. But where was Volodya? Where?

Vasya looked out of the open window. Volodya, however, had come in through the other end of the car, and took her into his arms.

"There you are, Volodya. How you frightened me."

They kissed.

"Quick, let me have your things. This is our secretary. Please take the things, Ivan Ivanovitch. We're going to the auto. I have a couple of horses now,

Vasya, a cow and a car. And I am intending to get some little pigs. We have a lot of room; it's a regular farm. You'll see for yourself. You'll live like the lady of the manor. Things are getting along well. Not long ago we opened a branch in Moscow."

Vladimir talked on and on. He could not tell her quickly enough of the things he was busy with, which filled his thoughts. Sitting in the auto, Vasya listened. And although she was very much interested in what Volodya had to say she would have liked to talk about her own affairs, to find out how he had got along without her. Had he longed for her very much? Had he waited very anxiously for her?

They drew up before the house. A one-family house with a garden. A half-grown youth, an errand-boy in a gallooned cap, was standing guard at the door. He helped them out of the car.

"Now, Vasya, we'll see how you like our house. Whether you'll find it better than your cage under the roof."

Carpet on the stairs. A mirror. A reception hall. Vasya took off her hat, dropped her coat. They went into the living-room. Sofas, rugs. A huge clock in the dining room. Some still lifes in gilded frames. Antlers on the wall.

"Well, how do you like it?" Vladimir was radiant with pride.

"I like it," Vasya replied uncertainly, looking about.

She didn't know herself whether she cared for it. Everything was so strange, so unfamiliar.

"And this is our bedroom." Vladimir opened the door wide. There were two windows opening on the garden. This pleased Vasya at once.

"Trees," she cried, delighted. "White acacias." She hurried to the window.

"Look around the room first; you'll have plenty of time to run around the garden. Isn't it nice, what I've prepared for you? I picked out and arranged everything myself. I've waited for you since the moment I moved in."

"Thanks, darling." Vasya stretched to kiss Volodya. But he seemed not to see it, took hold of her shoulders and turned her so that she faced the long mirror in the wardrobe.

"See how convenient it is. When you dress you can see yourself from top to toe in the mirror. There are shelves inside: for your underwear, for your hats, for all sorts of gewgaws. . . ."

"Why, how many hats and gewgaws do you think I have? You've hit the nail on the head." Vasya laughed.

But Volodya went on: "Will you look at the bed? A silk quilt—I had a hard time finding it. It belongs to me; I didn't get it among my supplies. And here's a pink lamp to light at night."

Vladimir showed Vasya around, pointing out every trifle, delighted as a child.

"Didn't I feather a cozy little nest for my little girl?" Vasya listened, smiling at his happiness, but still not quite at ease. She couldn't deny it, the rooms were nice, splendid. Rugs, curtains, mirrors! But not familiar. As if she had come into somebody else's house. The things were not what Vasya needed. There were no tables where she could spread her books and papers. Only one thing really pleased her. That she could see white acacias from the windows facing the garden.

"Get ready, now, and wash up; then we'll have some breakfast," said Vladimir, going over to the window to let down the shades.

"What are you doing that for?" objected Vasya. "It's so nice to look out into the garden."

"But it won't do. The shades have to be down by day, or the upholstery will fade."

Down sank the gray shades; like heavy eyelids they hid the green of the garden shining in through the window. And the room became gray, monotonous, even less familiar. Vasya washed her hands, and combed her curls before the mirror.

"What's that you have there? Did you have a dress made of the material I sent you?"

"Why, yes . . . ," expecting a word of praise, Vasya looked up at Volodya inquiringly.

"Let's have a good look at you." He turned her about. She could tell from his expression that he wasn't pleased.

"Where in the world did you get the idea of piling all that stuff on your hips? You've a narrow figure, just the thing for the new fashions. Why did you get this monstrosity?"

Vasya was confused, flushed to the roots of her hair. She felt guilty.

"Why a monstrosity? Grusha says that's stylish now."

"What does your Grusha know about it? She made a mess of the material. You look like the wife of a pope. You'd do better to take off that dress and put on your every-day skirt. You'd look more like yourself. This way you're neither fish, flesh, nor fowl."

Volodya did not see the disappointment in Vasya's face. He went out into the dining room to see about breakfast.

With a heavy heart Vasya pulled off Grusha's handiwork, and hastened to put on her old skirt and the blouse with the leather belt.

She was not at all happy. Two little tears dropped on the old blouse. They dried quickly. And there was an unpleasant coldness in Vasya's eyes.

* * * * *

The "manager's housekeeper" came to pay her respects during breakfast. Marya Semyonovna. A robust woman of middle age and respectable appearance.

Vasya shook hands with her.

"That wasn't necessary," said Vladimir after Marya

Semyonovna had left the dining room. "If you don't act like the lady of the house you'll have them all on your neck."

Vasya looked at him in amazement. "That's something I simply can't understand."

Vladimir served Vasya. But she had no appetite, felt ill at ease.

"Here, look at the tablecloth, Morosov linen. The napkins have the same design, too. But I didn't have them put out, it costs too much to wash them."

"Where did you get all these things? Did you really buy everything?" Vasya looked searchingly at Vladimir.

"Such an idea! Why, do you know what these furnishings would cost nowadays? Billions! Do you really think that my manager's salary enables me to buy such luxuries? All these things were supplied to me. I was lucky enough to come at the time when it was possible, with the assistance of some friends, to obtain such furnishings from the authorities. Now they've put a stop to all this. No one can have his house furnished like this today. Not unless he pays cash. Besides, I bought several things on my own account during the winter; the wardrobe with the mirror, in the bedroom, the silk quilt, the drawing room lamp. . . ." Vladimir enumerated everything, happily, contentedly.

Vasya's eyes grew colder and colder, shone with

wrath. They no longer seemed brown, but green, like a cat's eyes.

"And how much did all these splendid things cost you?" Vasya's voice trembled. Vladimir did not notice, but continued eating his chop and drinking his beer.

"Well, if you calculated the total, including what I've taken on credit, on the instalment plan, it amounts to. . . ."

Slowly, so as to impress Vasya, Vladimir mentioned a very considerable sum. Raising his laughing eyes to her face, he seemed to say: now do you see what a fine fellow I am?

"Why, Vasya, what's the matter with you?

She had jumped to her feet, was standing over him with angry green eyes.

"Where did you get the money? Tell me at once—where?"

"What's the matter, Vasya? Calm yourself. You surely don't believe that I got it dishonestly? Or don't you know anything about money values? Compare it with my salary, and you'll see." He told her the amount of his monthly drawing account and bonus.

"That's your salary? Your monthly salary? But how dare you, a Communist, spend it for such trash, for such nonsense? Poverty's increasing! Misery and famine are round about! And the unemployed? Have you forgotten them? Was there nothing irregular about your becoming the manager?"

The furious green eyes came closer to Vladimir. "Well, Sir Manager, will you be good enough to answer?"

Vladimir did not give up, but wanted to bring Vasya to reason, to convince her good-naturedly. He laughed at her. "You live like a sparrow under the gables, and have no idea of what money is worth. Others are earning even more, and live quite differently. They make a really elegant appearance."

But Vasya was not the sort to be defeated with words. She had made up her mind to demand an account. Why didn't he live as a Communist? Why did he throw away his money on foolish trifles while poverty and famine held sway round about him?

Vladimir realized that he couldn't get at her by this means. He would have to try another way. He would have to attempt a political explanation. That it was all a part of the manager's task. Instructions from headquarters. The main thing was to do all he could to make the undertaking flourish, to increase the earnings of his company. And this was his strongest point. Vasya must wait until she saw what he had accomplished in a year. He had built up everything in a deserted place, had increased the output, so that now the entire trust was dependent on his supervision. She would see for herself. Though he lived "like a human being" he was none the less concerned with every one of his employes, with the most humble shipping clerk. Let her only get an insight into the

matter, then she would think differently. But he had not expected that his friend, Vasya, his wife, his comrade, would come there to join in the chorus of his enemies. It was so hard to work that way. He gave all his energy to the cause, and these were his thanks. Even his wife was against him, wanted to condemn him.

Vladimir was offended and furious. His eyes were those of an angry wolf. They flashed fire at Vasya, as though to burn her. Because of her suspicion and condemnation.

Vasya listened thoughtfully. He might be right. Everything was different now. The most important thing was that his accounts were straight and the work done. The national wealth must be increased. She was not disputing that.

"Because I get some things, establish my own household? Am I to live in community houses forever? And why are we worse than American laborers? You should see how they live there. They have their own piano, their own Ford, their own motorcycle."

In the meantime the worthy Marya Semyonovna had looked into the dining room several times. She wanted to serve the fritters; and she saw that these two quarreled the moment they met. That's how it had been with the "real gentlefolk" whom she had served before the Revolution. They, or the Communists—they were all alike. Only, it was too bad about the fritters, they would spoil with the standing.

Vladimir took Vasya everywhere, showed her the offices, the warehouses and the homes. He took her to the bookkeeping department, too. "Just take a look at our books, you won't find such a system of accountancy anywhere else. See how wonderfully I've arranged things, and then tell me that I'm wasteful."

He asked the bookkeepers to explain to Vasya the principle of their system, which was simplified, but accurate. It had received special commendation from headquarters.

Vasya listened carefully. Although she couldn't understand everything she saw that they were trying hard and loved their work. Volodya, too, was in it with all his heart and soul. He took her to the homes of the employes, purposely asked their wives whether they were satisfied. He looked at Vasya triumphantly. Everyone said the same thing: Were they satisfied? Nowadays it was impossible to be better off. "We owe our lives to your providence, Vladimir Ivanovitch."

"There! And you say I'm a spendthrift! Believe me, I took care of our employes first. I got as much as I could for them. And only then did I think of myself. You see how they live. The workingmen are just as well off as the office force. I made special efforts in their behalf. Really, I did everything I possibly could."

"Very well, you did all that. But what about them? What did they do for themselves?"

"What peculiar ideas you have, Vasya. Don't we have the same interests, they and I? Before, of course, the manager stood on one side, and the workers on the other. But not now, not here. You've become moss-grown in your little bog."

He was joking, yet Vasya felt that Vladimir wasn't pleased, that she had offended him. He spent the entire day taking her about the various buildings of the works. Vasya grew tired. Her temples began to throb; she had a stitch in her side, a backache. If only she could go home, lie down and go to sleep. Her head was still buzzing with the noise of the train-wheels. But Volodya had just told her that there would be guests for dinner. She was to receive them.

They came home, entered the hall. The errand-boy opened the door, and remained standing, as though expecting a command. Looking at him, Vladimir took a notebook from his pocket, scribbled a few words, and gave the note to the boy.

"Now hurry, Vassya, so there'll be no delay. You'll bring the answer to me personally. Understand?"

He turned to Vasya again, looked at her with an odd expression on his face, half guilty, half inquiring.

"What's the matter with you, Vasyuk? Why do you stare at me so?" His voice sounded uncertain.

"Nothing's the matter. But—the errand-boy's name is Vassya, too?"

"Yes; don't you like the idea of there being two Vasya's in my house? Can you imagine! She's

jealous! But you needn't worry. There's not another Vasya like you in the world."

Gently he put his arm about her, gazed into her eyes, and kissed her. It was the first time he had caressed her all day. They went into the bedroom arm in arm.

* * * * *

The dinner-guests arrived: Savelyev and Ivan Ivanovitch, the secretary of the administration. Savelyev was a tall, lean man, in a light gray suit. His thin hair was neatly combed, and he wore a seal-ring on his index-finger. Clever, rather crafty eyes, an unpleasant smile on his smooth-shaven face. As though he were watching everything, and as if everything were the same to him as long as he was well off. That's how it seemed to Vasya.

When he met Vasya he raised her hand to his lips. She pulled it away.

"I'm not used to that."

"As you say. But I never object to kissing the hand of a young woman. It's pleasant, and the husband can't be jealous. You must be very jealous, Vladimir Ivanovitch? Confess!"

As he spoke he slapped Volodya's back. Vladimir laughed.

"Vasya is a model wife, there's no need of being jealous of her."

"So she doesn't follow her husband's example?"

Savelyev winked at Vladimir. And Vladimir's eyes suddenly grew big and frightened.

"I don't think I've ever done anything to . . ."

Savelyev interrupted. "Never mind. We know how you are, you married men. I've been through it myself. But now I'm leading a bachelor's life."

Vasya didn't like Savelyev. Didn't like him at all. But Volodya talked with him as with a friend. About business, about politics. Vasya wouldn't have discussed politics with this "speculator," wouldn't have laughed with him at the Chairman of the Executive Committee. She would have to reason with Volodya, persuade him to drop this friendship.

They had wine for dinner. The secretary, Ivan Ivanovitch, had brought it in a basket. They were worried about some large shipments that had failed to arrive, and which they were afraid would come too late for the fair.

Vasya listened, trying to grasp the meaning of it all. But it seemed to her that these things weren't so very important, as if the main point were not being mentioned. The throbbing and hammering of her temples bothered her, and her eyes hurt. If only the meal were over.

Vladimir ordered the auto right after dinner. He had to attend an important meeting concerning the shipment.

"Are you really going to the meeting today? The day your wife came? You ought to stay with her.

It's not nice of you, Vladimir Ivanovitch." Savelyev looked at Vladimir with a crooked smile.

"Impossible," interrupted Vladimir, carefully lighting a cigarette. He would have been glad to stay—business, you know.

Savelyev could not refrain from saying, "There are two sides to everything."

And again Vasya thought he was winking at Vladimir, laughing at him. A disgusting speculator.

"If I were in your place I'd drop everything else today, and spend the first evening with your wife Your business won't run away."

Vladimir didn't answer, but picked up his cap angrily.

"Well, Nikanor Platonovitch, are we ready to go?"

They drove off, Ivan Ivanovitch going with them. Vasya was left alone. Alone, in the great empty house that was so strange to her. She went through the rooms. Dreary, lonely, cold. She stood beside the window. Then she lay down on the bed with the silk quilt, and fell asleep at once.

She awoke with a start. It was dark. Lighting the lamp, she glanced at the clock. A quarter past twelve. Had she really slept so long? Past midnight. And Vladimir had not come in.

Getting up, Vasya bathed her face and went into the dining room.

The supper-table was set, the light was burning. The room was empty and still, the rest of the house

dark. She went into the kitchen, where Marya Semyonovna was straightening things.

"Hasn't Vladimir Ivanovitch returned?"

"No. Not yet."

"Does he always come back so late from his meetings?"

"It depends."

Marya Semyonovna was sullen, and sparing with her words.

"How about you? Are you waiting up for him? Aren't you going to bed?"

"Vassya and I take turns. One day he stays up, the next day I do."

"Will Vladimir have supper when he comes?"

"If he brings any guests I guess he'll have some. Otherwise he goes straight to his room."

Vasya stayed a little while longer, silent. She saw that Marya Semyonovna was busy with her own affairs, and paid no attention to her.

Going back to the bedroom, Vasya opened the window. A cool, quiet spring night. The air was filled with the strong perfume of the acacias. The frogs croaked loudly, curiously. At first Vasya thought they were night birds.

The sky was dark, and dotted with many, many twinkling stars. Vasya gazed into the dark garden, looked up at the sky and stars. Her heart became calmer. She forgot the speculator, Savelyev, forgot the pain Vladimir had involuntarily caused her during

the day. Now she felt with all her soul that she had come to him, to her beloved, to help and guide him. One who associates with Nep-people cannot help leaving the right road. That was why he had summoned her, his friend and wife.

Remembering how Vladimir had arranged everything, Vasya was proud of him. How energetic he was. Now she saw things in a different light. Everything seemed clearer, more intelligible, more cheerful than during the day.

Vasya was so absorbed with her thoughts that she failed to hear either the car drawing up or Vladimir walking over the rugs and carpets to her. The sound of his voice made her start.

"What were we thinking about so hard, little Vasyuk mine?"

As Vladimir bent over her, his eyes seemed anxious and loving.

"Have you really come, dear? I've been waiting so long."

She threw her arms about his neck.

Vladimir picked her up as in the first months of their love, and carried her through the room like an adored child.

Vasya felt happy and gay. Volodya loved her, loved her as always! How silly she had been! Why had she felt hurt in the morning?

They drank tea together, had an intimate and affec-

tionate talk. Vasya pronounced her opinion of Savelyev. "It's better not to be a friend of his."

Vladimir did not deny it. He admitted that he, too, had no respect for him; but he was useful; the whole business would have been impossible without him. He had many connections from before, and enjoyed the confidence of the merchants; it was possible to come in contact with them through him. Volodya, too, had learned much from him. Frankly speaking, he was not worth much as a man. A genuine *burshui;* but in business he was indispensable. That was why Volodya had defended him when the highest authorities, the "super-clever fellows," had arrested Savelyev. And he was highly esteemed in Moscow. The local authorities had been given a good calling-down on his account.

"Yes, but didn't you write me that his hands aren't clean?"

"How can I make it clear to you? He's our representative. Of course he doesn't neglect himself. But he's no worse than the others. Besides, the other fellows dawdle about and do nothing, while he works conscientiously. And he knows his work, likes it."

All this notwithstanding, however, Vladimir promised to see less of him. Business was business, but it didn't necessitate a friendship.

Having finished their tea, they returned to the bedroom arm in arm. Vladimir pressed Vasya's head to his breast, kissed her curls, and spoke thoughtfully,

tenderly. "Such a dear little head. It'll always be mine, won't it? Another friend like you, Vasya, doesn't exist. I love only you, my Vasya, my little tomboy."

* * * * *

Vasya woke up late. Vladimir had gone to work long before.

She didn't feel well. She had shooting pains in her side, felt feverish, and was beginning to cough. Had she caught cold on the trip? Although it was a beautiful sunny day she wrapped a shawl about her. She didn't want to move, and didn't want to get up. Marya Semyonovna came into the room, stood in the doorway, folded her hands before her, and looked at Vasya as though she were expecting something.

"Good morning, Marya Semyonovna."

"Good morning," was the dry response. "What will you order for dinner? When he left, Vladimir Ivanovitch said you'd attend to everything. You're having guests."

Vasya was at a loss. She had no idea what she should order. At home, in the community house, she had had only such food as the State supplied.

Seeing that Vasya knew nothing whatever about such matters, Marya Semyonovna suggested various dishes. Vasya agreed to everything. But she inquired as to the cost. Wouldn't it be very dear? Marya Semyonovna's mouth snapped shut.

"Well, if you want a good dinner, you can't save on it. You can't have anything without money. The Communists have done away with the *payoks*."

"Do you have any money?"

"There's a little left from yesterday, but not enough for today. Meat is expensive, and we'll have to buy butter, too."

"So Vladimir left you no money?"

"He left me nothing. He only said: 'Go to Vassilissa Dementyevna and discuss everything with her.' "

What should she do now? Marya Semyonovna stood there, waiting for the money, and would not go. Vasya had a little money left, but the household would soon eat it up; and she would be left without a kopek. She didn't like that idea.

"Why don't you advance some of your money to me, and then have Vladimir Ivanovitch give it back to you?" suggested Marya Semyonovna.

"Really, that never occurred to me!"

And the matter was settled.

When Marya Semyonovna had gone Vasya went out into the garden. She walked up and down the paths for a long time, until she was tired. She felt so exhausted. Lying down, she took up a book, and fell asleep over it.

* * * * *

Vasya lay stretched on the bed. Her cheeks were burning, her sleep was disturbed by dismal, tormenting

dreams. Waking, she looked about fretfully. Why had she gone to sleep? It would have been better to see the sights of the city. She hadn't come to Vladimir to be sick. Yet she hadn't the slightest desire to raise her head. She closed her eyes, and her thoughts immediately became confused. It was no proper sleep, not even a doze. But she wasn't fully conscious, either.

"Vassilissa Dementyevna, Vladimir Ivanovitch will come in for dinner any moment; you should get dressed. Then I could make the bed. He hates to see disorder in the house."

Marya Semyonovna was bending over Vasya as though, being the elder, she wanted to correct her.

"Is it that late?"

"Almost five. And you haven't even had breakfast. I wanted to wake you before, but you were so sound asleep. That's from the trip. You haven't got over it yet."

"It might be the trip, or I may have caught cold. I feel chilled."

"You should put on your woollen dress; it'll be warmer. The little rag you're wearing isn't any good."

"My suit turned out badly. My husband didn't like it at all."

"Why do you say that? It's not so bad. There may be too many pleats on the hips, and the waistline isn't just where it should be. Nowadays they're wearing

the waistline . . . I've been a dressmaker, too. I know all about clothes. Just you let me remodel the skirt. We'll change that dress so Vladimir Ivanovitch won't recognize it."

"Will it be ready by dinner-time?"

"That's asking a little too much. No, we'll do it slowly; we won't rush it. Now you put on your black skirt and wear the coat of your suit over it. That'll look very well."

Never before had Vasya spent so much time before the mirror. Marya Semyonovna was forever finding something to change. Here she fastened something with pins, there she made some long stitches. She found a lace collar, too. The effect was quite good. Simple, yet elegant. Even Vasya liked it. What would Vladimir say about it?

Almost as soon as she was finished Vladimir came with his guests: an employe of the G. P. U. (what had been the Cheka) and his wife. The ends of his mustache had been waxed to needle points; he was foppishly dressed, with tan boots that reached to his knees. And that called himself a Communist!

Vasya didn't like him at all. And his wife—dressed up like a street-walker! She wore a thin dress, white shoes and a fur scarf across her shoulders; her fingers were glittering with rings. Vladimir kissed her hand, jested with her. What were they talking about? She couldn't understand it. It was all non-

sense. Vladimir was bending over her gallantly, his eyes flirting with hers.

Vasya sat beside the man from the G. P. U. He was a Communist. But she had no idea of what to say to him.

They had wine again. Vladimir touched glasses with the lady; she whispered something to him, and both laughed. It annoyed Vasya. But he paid no attention to her. As if she didn't belong to him. Queer! She didn't like it.

Jokingly they mentioned the fasts. The lady said that she was religious and went to confession, even though she did not fast. How could that be? A Comrade of the G. P. U. married to a believer? Vasya scowled. She was out of humor. Because of Vladimir, too. What sort of friends did he have? Toward the end of the meal, Ivan Ivanovitch came in to tell them that Savelyev had taken a box in the theatre, and had invited them.

"We'll go, won't we, Vasya?" asked Vladimir.

"With Savelyev?" Vasya tried to catch his eyes; but he pretended not to understand.

"Yes, of course, with Nikanor Platonovitch. With the whole crowd. They're giving a new operetta. It'll amuse you."

"No, I won't go."

"Why not?"

"I don't feel quite well. I must have caught cold on the trip."

Vladimir looked closely at her.

"Really, you don't look well, Vasya. Your eyes are quite sunken. Let me have your hand. Why, it's terribly hot. Of course you can't go. And I won't go either."

"But why not? Do go!"

The guests, too, persuaded Vladimir, and he gave in.

In the hall Vladimir embraced Vasya in the presence of the others, and whispered in her ear: "You look unusually pretty today, Vasya."

He asked Marya Semyonovna to take care of Vassilissa Dementyevna.

"Go to bed right away, Vasya. I'll be back soon. I won't stay to the end."

They drove off.

Vasya wandered about the rooms, quite forlorn.

She didn't like this life. She couldn't say just what was wrong with it. But everything was new and unfamiliar. And she was a stranger here; no one had need of her. Vladimir might love her, but he thought of her so little. He had put his arms around her, kissed her and gone away. It was different when he had to go to a meeting, to work. But this time it was the theatre! Why had he gone without her? Hadn't he seen enough of the theatre during the winter? Something was troubling Vasya, haunting her. She couldn't express it. She felt ill at ease.

"I'll stay here a week," she decided. "I'll see how things stand with Volodya, and then I'll go."

But there was the rub. Where would she go? Back to the community house? Her room there, her attic under the roof was gone. Her friend, Grusha the seamstress, was living in it. Besides, the Fedosseyevs were there; there would be gossip and worry. Once more she would have to fight everybody for the house. And she felt too worn out for that. Besides, she had lost faith in the soundness of the proposition. And that was the most important point.

No, she had no place where she could go.

This thought made her heart even heavier, stabbed it as with a steel blade.

Vasya was cold. Shivering, she drew her hands into her sleeves. She wandered through the dark, empty rooms. She felt as if this strange house were preparing sorrow for her. A lurking disaster.

A premonition?

Could a Communist believe in premonitions? But it must be that. Else, why this melancholy? This infinite, nameless, fruitless melancholy?

CHAPTER VII

Vladimir came home early, as he had promised. Vasya was in bed.

He sat down beside her, and inquired how she felt. He looked into her eyes as he spoke, and his grave, sad gaze puzzled Vasya. His eyes seemed to bespeak suffering.

"What's the trouble, Volodya? You're so gloomy."

Burying his head in the pillow beside her, Volodya spoke in a despondent tone. "Life isn't a bed of roses, Vasya. You don't know how hard it is for me. You see only one side of my life. And you refuse to understand. If you could read my heart, how hard I tried all winter, you wouldn't condemn me. You'd pity me. You're so good, Vasya."

She stroked his head, quieted him. And though she felt sorry for him her heart was full of joy. She felt that they had the same thought, had suffered the same pain. It wasn't easy for a proletarian to act like a manager. She told him so.

But Volodya shook his head mournfully.

"It's not only that, Vasya, not only that. There's something else that torments me, that lets me have no peace."

"Are they plotting against you?"

Volodya remained silent; it seemed that he wanted to say something, but couldn't make up his mind.

Vasya put her arms about him. "Tell me what's bothering you, dear."

She laid her head on his shoulder.

"What smells so of perfume? When did you put on perfume?" Raising her head she looked at him.

"Perfume?" Volodya seemed embarrassed. He withdrew a bit. "I probably got it with my shave today. The barber must have put it on."

Vladimir got up, lit a cigarette, slowly, carefully, and left Vasya. He absolutely had to look through some papers that evening.

Vasya coughed a little. She felt rather ill and feverish, had shooting pains in her side. Vladimir noticed it, although she tried to control herself in his presence. Her coughing disturbed him, and he had his bed made on the sofa in the drawing room.

The days dragged on. It was so dreary. She had nothing to do. Only little household worries now and then. Vladimir was trying to save, but insisted on everything being "just as it should be." Vasya gave her little reserve to the household, for she didn't like it when Volodya rebuked her:

"Have you really used up all your housekeeping money? It's impossible to get enough for you women."

As if it were Vasya who invited guests and wanted

three courses for dinner! However, she had no cause to complain of Vladimir. He was very solicitous in other ways. He was worried about Vasya's health and had gone for the doctor himself. The diagnosis was general debility; and the right lung was affected. She was ordered to lie in the sun as much as possible, and to eat nourishing food. Vladimir was always inquiring whether she was doing everything the doctor had ordered. Marya Semyonovna was to see to it that Vasya had her meals at the proper time. He had procured cocoa for her, and had brought a chaise longue for the garden, so that she could warm herself in the sun. Vladimir seemed very anxious about her.

When he came home he went to her immediately. They didn't see much of each other, for Vladimir was very busy just then. It was a time of feverish work; the fair was to open soon. Vladimir seemed worried, thoughtful and rather depressed.

Lying on her chaise longue on the little lawn, Vasya sunned herself like a lizard, and enjoyed life. She turned over from one side to the other, grew tanned as a little gypsy. A queer life. No work. No cares. But no joy, either. Like a dream. She was always thinking: Now, now I'll wake up and I'll be back home, in the community house. She thought once more of the Housing Bureau, the Comrades, Stepan Alexeyevitch, Grusha. Even of the Fedosseyevs. It had been a trying life, but it had been happier.

She was waiting for Vladimir. He had promised

to come home earlier that day. Vasya had the feeling that today she would be able to talk with him. To have a good heart-to-heart talk. But day passed after day, and they never had that talk. There were always guests, or pressing work.

Savelyev no longer visited them, nor the usual guests, but members of the administration, who were strange and uninteresting to Vasya. Their conversation consisted only of consignments and unloadings, of packing and invoices, of sales and rising prices.

Vasya knew that all this was essential for the Republic, that the national economy could not be built up without an exchange of goods, but it bored her to listen to it. When she turned the conversation to Party matters, to Bucharin's article, or the newspaper reports about the German Communists, they listened to her, and returned to their subject: shipments, consignments, net and gross. Vladimir wasn't bored. The Comrades brought him to life. He debated with them, let them advise him. Only when he was alone with her, with Vasya, did he grow downcast. He would sigh, pat her hands, and look at her unhappily. He didn't ask for her help, didn't complain. What could be bothering him? The intrigues against him seemed to have come to an end. She had heard nothing of them since her arrival. But what gave him such low spirits? He surely didn't think that Vasya might die? This idea gladdened her. So he must love her? True, he spent little time with her; but she hadn't spoiled him,

either, when he had been her guest. She, too, had been on the go all day, had hardly had time to think of her man. But she loved him no less for all that.

Lying on her chaise longue, Vasya was delighted with the treetops standing out against the blue sky. The summer breeze gently swayed them, as with a caress. The crickets were chirping in the grass, the birds were singing loudly in the bushes.

Getting up, Vasya walked along the grass-covered path to a lilac-bush in full bloom. How sweet it smelled. She plucked a branch. Buzz-z-z,—a bee flew past her, settled down on a purple mass, and dusted off its wings.

"Well, well, how brave you are. Aren't you afraid of people?" laughed Vasya. And suddenly she felt happy, so free, that she was amazed at herself. She looked around as if she were seeing the garden for the first time. The green grass, the strong perfume, the purple lilacs—the little pond covered with duckweed, full of frogs croaking, calling to one another.

Vasya didn't dare move. She was afraid that this sudden joy, this bright, light-winged joy might fly out of her heart. It was as if she had never known or felt or understood the meaning of life before. But now she had grasped it. No despondency, no rushing about, no work, no joy, no pushing toward a goal, but life pure and simple. Life, like the life of the bee circling over the lilacs, like the life of the birds singing in the trees, like the life of the crickets chirping in

the grass. Life! Life! Life! Why couldn't one spend all one's life among the lilacs? Why couldn't man be like all of God's creatures? "God's?" She was angry with herself. Since when was she thinking of God? That was the result of her idleness, of her *burshui* life, of Volodya's good food. She might easily become a real Nep-girl if she continued this way.

Vasya hurried into the house. She was afraid of becoming soft.

But the joyful feeling stayed with her. She was in high spirits. Had she grown stronger, regained her health?

Hardly had Vasya come into the bedroom and put the lilacs into the vase when Vladimir drove up in the car.

He hurried over to her.

"Now they've begun. They've let me alone long enough, these gossiping schemers. Now they've found new energy to dig up old matters. They've just summoned me before the Supervisory Commission. They're bringing an action against me. But we'll see. We'll see who'll come out ahead."

Vladimir was running about the room, one hand at his back, a sign of agitation.

His Anarchism had been thrown up to him, too, and lack of discipline and the devil alone knew what more!

Here he was, killing himself with work to get things going, but instead of helping, those fellows of the

Executive Committee were only putting spokes in his wheels.

"If they keep on with this persecution, I'll leave the Party. I'll leave it of my own accord. They needn't threaten me with expulsion."

Vasya saw it as a serious matter. She felt anxious, oppressed. Was this the lurking disaster? But she gave no sign of her thoughts. Instead, she tried to calm Vladimir, to bring him to reason.

"And your beloved Stepan Alexeyevitch—he's a fine fellow! They asked him about me. And, if you please, he could think of nothing better than to praise my work and say that for the rest I'm afflicted with self-complacency and moral instability. What sort of priests are they, judging a man not by his work and actions, but by his morals? I don't live as a 'Communist'! Do they want to order me to become a monk? Are they any better? Now look! They're not dragging the head of the propaganda division into court, although he deserted his wife and three children and married a common street-walker. Do you think that's right? Should a Communist act like that? Why do they expect me to live like an ascetic? What business of theirs is my private life, anyway?"

Here Vasya no longer agreed with Vladimir. The C. P. was right. It was not in keeping with the dignity of a Communist to imitate the *burshuis*. A Communist, and a manager besides, must lead an exemplary life.

"But where the devil do you find me to blame? Of what does my non-Communism consist? Of my refusing to live in filth? Of my work forcing me to know every muckworm? Why don't they prescribe whom one may invite into one's house, how many chairs one may have, how many pairs of pants a Communist may own?"

Vladimir was raging. He disputed with Vasya, but she was grateful for the opportunity to speak out everything she had been keeping in her heart. She didn't know herself just what was wrong, but it seemed to her that Vladimir's life and actions were not those of a Communist. Vladimir was trying to say that business would not go as well if there were no mirrors or rugs in the manager's home; but she didn't believe it. She wasn't convinced that it was necessary to be good friends with Savelyev, or that business went better because Vladimir kissed every woman's hand.

"So you agree with them? I knew it. I thought so. You didn't come as my friend, but as my judge. You join in the chorus. And now I know that you despise me as the others do. Why don't you say so openly? Why do you suppress your rage? Why do you torment me?"

Vladimir was livid, his eyes were flashing. His voice was full of fury and indignation. Vasya did not understand. Why did he flare up so? Wasn't it permitted to contradict him nowadays? Such conceit! If only he wouldn't have cause to regret it later.

"Oh, Vasya, Vasya. I didn't think that of you. I didn't suppose you'd desert me in my need. But I see I was mistaken. So let everything go to the devil! If I'm destined to perish, all right. Then, at least, everything'll be over."

He brought down his fist on the table, upsetting the vase. The fragrant purple masses fell to the floor; a shining rivulet of water flowed over the silk scarf.

"Now, look what you've done."

Waving her away, Vladimir went to the window. He stared out sullenly. Looking at him, Vasya felt great pity for him, as usual. It wasn't easy for him. But things were hard for every proletarian. It was difficult to see one's way, to know what was right, what was permissible.

"Let's stop, Volodya. Why are you so discouraged? It's too soon for that. This matter still has to be investigated. And you've committed no crime. So it's only a question of your insubordination. Just you wait, I'll go to the Committee myself and try to find out what the trouble is. Everything'll be set to rights again."

Standing beside Vladimir, she laid her hand on his shoulder and tried to look into his face. But he seemed not to notice, stood there gloomily, absorbed in his thoughts. He hadn't heard her at all. What was the matter with him? Why were they so strange to each other, so little like "comrades"? Vasya brooded

silently. All the joy had gone out of her heart. There remained only anxiety, dull, oppressive anxiety.

* * * * *

The next day Vasya went to the Party Committee. The more she had questioned Vladimir the more alarmed she had become. Though the accusations seemed biased they were not to be taken lightly. How would the matter turn out?

Vasya hurried through the strange city, asking the way of passers-by, but wasting not a glance on the sights. She wanted to get to the Party Committee as quickly as possible. She couldn't get rid of her alarm.

It was in a separate large building. The red flag flying over the entrance. The sign beside the door seemed so familiar, made her feel as if she were at home, in her own province. And suddenly she was happy, yearned to see "her own people." She didn't consider the Comrades who visited Vladimir members of the Party.

She asked for the Chairman's office. The boy at the information table gave her directions.

"Write down your name and why you've come. It's possible that he'll see you today, but you might have to wait till Thursday."

What sort of bureaucracy was that? Vasya didn't like it, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Sitting down at a table, she filled out the blank. "Here, take this to the secretary," the information clerk handed the paper to the office boy. "Go up the stairs, turn to your left. That'll bring you to the waiting room. Just take a seat there."

He uttered these directions in a bored voice.

Suddenly he woke up: "Manyka, Manyka, how did you get here?"

She was a half-grown girl, wearing a short skirt and fashionable hat. Her eyes sparkled coquettishly.

"I'm going to see some friends. Why shouldn't I come to your Party Committee?"

Disapprovingly Vasya appraised her as a street-walker. "In the old days such a creature wasn't allowed to visit friends in Party Headquarters."

Vasya walked through the long, bright hall; employes, male and female, hurried past her. There was no inactivity. Everybody was busy. Only she was superfluous.

In the waiting room she was received by the attendant clerk, a beardless youth. With an important air he asked for her name, and looked it up in a record book kept by a hunchback.

"It's long before your turn. Your business isn't urgent. You'll have to wait."

Vasya sat down in the back. There were others waiting too. Among them several laborers with peaked, miserable faces and threadbare coats. They were engaged in an animated discussion. Evidently a dele-

gation. A tall, well-dressed gentleman with glasses—a specialist, of course—was absorbed in the reading of an old newspaper. A little old woman, a working woman—with a waterproof shawl, was sitting there patiently, sighing.

Then there was a Red Guard, a jolly young fellow in the pink of health. A peasant in a short jacket, and, beside him, a pope in his cassock. Why might he be there?

"It's your turn, Father," said the attendant, showing him into the Chairman's office. "He belongs to the Living Church," he explained to the rest. "A very clever fellow. He can be useful to us."

Various clerks came in, bob-haired Communist girls in short, worn-out skirts, bustling back and forth, bringing papers to sign, making inquiries of the attendant. They whispered to him, and ran away again.

A very fashionably dressed woman came in. She behaved like a "fine lady," but actually she was the wife of a prominent Party worker, and didn't belong to the Party herself. Vasya knew her. She asked to be shown in before her turn. She had a note from a member of the Central Committee. Having come from Moscow, she had no time to wait. The attendant was firm. But the letterhead of the C. C. seemed to shake him. Finally he said he could not break the rules. If it was a personal matter she would please wait her turn. The "pseudo-lady," as Vasya thought of her, was indignant. She couldn't understand these

provincial regulations. In Moscow she would have been given an audience immediately. In Moscow they were fighting against bureaucracy, but here! Forever inventing new rules! "Officials!"

She sat down, deeply offended, and carefully smoothed her dress.

A corpulent man rushed in noisily, his cap on the back of his head, his overcoat unbuttoned. "A Nep-fellow," thought Vasya.

"I say, Comrade, what sort of system do you have here? My time is valuable; we're just making a shipment, and they're delaying me with all sorts of nonsense. Want me to fill out blanks! Announce me—Konrashev."

And he threw back his head with a self-satisfied air, as though he were Lenin himself. Vasya felt all her old hatred of the *burshuis* boiling up in her. That fellow ought to be arrested, to be brought to court. That monkey-face, that impudent monkey-face!

The attendant apologized. But it couldn't be done. Rules. The Nep-fellow refused to listen. He became insistent in his demands, and won his point. The secretary went into the other room to announce him. But he returned with fresh apologies.

"The Chairman asks that you take a seat. He has to see two others before you on urgent business."

"What the devil sort of system is this! And they want a fellow to do business with them! They demand everything of us, and make threats besides. Call

us saboteurs. I'd like to know who is committing sabotage here!"

He wiped off his perspiration with his handkerchief. The "pseudo-lady" nodded in approbation. The bespectacled gentleman peered disapprovingly at her from behind his paper. The laborers were busy with their own affairs, as if they hadn't noticed the noisy Nepfellow.

They were the next to be called in. After them the "specialist" with the glasses had his turn.

It was a tiresome wait. Going to the window, she looked down into a garden, where two children were running about, chasing a dog. Their high clear voices were audible upstairs.

"Pull Bobka's tail. Then he'll howl. But he doesn't bite. Here, Bobka! Catch him, catch Bobka! . . ."

Now it was Vasya's turn. The Chairman was a small man, hardly visible behind his big desk. He wore a pointed beard and glasses. He was so emaciated that his shoulder bones stood out through his coat.

He glanced ungraciously at Vasya, and gave her his hand without looking up.

"What do you want? Something personal?" He spoke briefly, dryly, as if she had made a plea.

"I've come to report at headquarters." It would be better not to mention Volodya's affair at first, thought Vasya. He'd never meet her half way.

"I came here a little while ago."

"So I have heard. Are you here for any length of time?"

"I have a two months' leave of absence, but I may stay here longer, because of my delicate health."

"Are you simply resting, or do you want some work?"

As he spoke he didn't look at Vasya, but arranged his papers. As if to show her that he had no time for idle talk.

"I wouldn't accept any regular position. But you could use me in your propaganda work."

"I could use you, yes. We're beginning the work of transition to a local budget next week. Didn't I hear that you have specialized in housing problems?" Again he glanced at Vasya, only to return to his papers.

"I've worked in the Housing Bureau for two years. I've organized some community houses."

"Ah! That sounds interesting. You must teach us how to make the community houses self-supporting."

Vasya shook her head. "I can't do that. When we wanted to become self-supporting everything went to pieces. A community house is on the order of a school to develop the Communist spirit."

"But, you see, this isn't the time for such things. Give us a reasonable idea of the cost, a financial estimate, to take the burden off the state budget. But how can you want to combine the housing question with education? We have schools and universities

for that." The Chairman smiled a very superior smile that irritated Vasya.

Suddenly she rose.

"Good day, Comrade."

"Good-bye."

This time he looked more carefully at her. Vasya, too, looked coolly into his eyes.

"You might go to the propaganda department, and register there. Then you could stop in the women's division, they always need workers there."

"I also wanted to ask you how the matter of Vladimir Ivanovitch stands." As she asked this she looked keenly at the Chairman. He, too, had his finger in the pie.

"Why, what could I tell you?" Wrinkling his forehead, the Chairman shifted his cigarette to the corner of his crooked mouth. "It's quite serious. I've heard of you, that your standing in the Party is very good. But I'm not the right man to tell you anything about Vladimir Ivanovitch."

"Of what do you accuse him? Vladimir Ivanovitch has done nothing criminal, couldn't do anything of that sort."

"What do you mean by criminal? But I've nothing to do with this business. Try to find out something from the S. C. Good-bye."

He nodded to her, and again buried himself in his papers. Don't bother me, I'm busy.

Scowling, furious, Vasya left the Chairman. Even

a non-Communist wasn't given such a reception in her province. She had come to her people, and had been treated like a stranger. Vladimir was right. They had become officials, with the manner of military governors.

Vasya walked on thoughtfully, without even noticing that she had come on a man from home, Michailo Pavlovitch, a worker in the machinery division of the factory where Vasya had been employed.

"By all the saints, what do I see! The fair Vassilissa! Good morning."

"My dear Michailo Pavlovitch."

They embraced and kissed.

"Are you visiting your husband?"

"And what are you doing here?"

"I'm cleaning up the Party. I'm a member of the S. C. and we're forever cleaning up, but we can't get rid of all the muck."

He laughed into his red beard. His eyes were warm, cordial. Still good through and through, as he always had been.

Both were delighted, asked and answered questions. Michailo Pavlovitch took Vasya to his cell beside the main entrance. In the good old days the janitor had lived there. Michailo Pavlovitch had settled there temporarily on his arrival, and had stayed there. An insignificant little room: a bed, a basket containing his personal belongings, two chairs, and a table covered with newspapers, glasses and tobacco.

They were glad to have met each other, and their conversation flowed on smoothly. They spoke of friends and comrades. Provincial questions came up; they discussed what was sound and what rotten. They spoke of the Nep, too. Michailo Pavlovitch was thoroughly sick of the Nep. Nor could he stand the Chairman of the provincial Committee.

"A little man, but very proud of himself. 'I, Me and Company.' Of course, he's a hard worker, energetic and not stupid. But he wants to be everything. He'd like to be Chairman of the light that comes in through the window. The workers can't stomach that. They say that the Congress has decided on democratization, but that our bureaucracy has only increased. There is more fawning and a great deal of gossip. They're forming cliques that disturb our work, and undermine the authority of the Party. It's the Chairman's job to hold them all together impartially, like a father. But he drives people apart."

"By the way, Michailo Pavlovitch, how do Vladimir's affairs stand? What is he accused of? Is it serious? Tell me, as a friend."

Michailo Pavlovitch stroked his red beard. He thought for a while before he answered. "In itself the matter isn't worth a straw. If our Communists were to be brought to court for such things almost all of them would have to be condemned. The whole trouble is that Vladimir Ivanovitch couldn't agree with the Chairman from the very beginning. Each insisted

on his rights. The Chairman issued orders which Vladimir Ivanovitch did not follow, saying that they were the business of the Party, and did not concern him. 'I'm not your subordinate, I'm connected with the economic organization only. Let that judge whether I do my work properly.' There were conflicts, and the matter was taken up in Moscow, where some supported the Chairman while others defended the manager. No definite decision was reached. Both were right.

"So matters went from bad to worse. Neither would give in. Both would send denunciatory letters to Moscow at every opportunity. After things had gone on that way a while there came a commission from Moscow to smooth over the quarrel. They worked out a strict agreement. But the moment the commission had gone the squabbling began all over again."

Now the matter was before the S. C. Michailo Pavlovitch would try to settle it peaceably. The manager was working in his own domain. The Central Committee was satisfied. And there really was nothing with which he could be charged. There couldn't be. Michailo was convinced of that. Didn't he know the "American," the Anarchist? He still remembered how they had established the Soviet together in '17, how they had worked together. And as for his living in great style, his unexemplary conduct, and his uncom-

radelike manner—were any of them without blame in this respect?

However, the Chairman and the other members of the Commission were all for going into the matter, for making an example of the manager, and for showing that the Party didn't take such things lightly. To discourage others from doing the same.

"But what does Vladimir Ivanovitch do? Is it because his house is nicely furnished? But that isn't his own; it belongs to the State, and has been put at the disposal of the manager."

"It's not only the furnishings. People are wondering where he gets the means to support two households."

"How has he two households? Do you think that Vladimir has been supporting me? How could you imagine such a thing? If you really want to know, I've even contributed my own money to the household. Because Vladimir can't manage with his. His work compels us to receive people, to have dinner-guests."

As Michailo Pavlovitch listened to Vasya she thought she read pity of some sort in his eyes. She didn't like that. Why should he pity her? Because she was defending the "Anarchist"? Long ago, when she had first become associated with Vladimir, Michailo Pavlovitch had opposed her election.

"Why are you against me? Don't you believe me? How could you think that I would press him for money?"

"I'm not speaking of you, my darling. But it's not

proper for him to have such objectionable friends."

He looked searchingly at Vasya as he spoke.

"Are you alluding to Savelyev?"

"Yes, Savelyev, too. And the others. . . ."

"Savelyev doesn't come to us any more. Vladimir has promised me not to have any but business relations with him. And as for the others, it's all in his work. There are a great many people he doesn't like, who are strangers to us. But what can he do? They're in the business, shareholders or technicians."

"Ye-e-es!" drawled Michailo Pavlovitch, thoughtfully stroking his beard.

Vasya told him that she, too, couldn't understand many things. Sometimes she didn't know herself what was right and what was wrong. What was permissible, and what should a Communist not do? People had changed and so had the work.

She would have liked to stay longer with her friend, but Michailo was sent for to go to the S. C.

As they parted they arranged that Michailo Pavlovitch would acquaint Vasya with his factory boys. As for the question of the manager, he would think it over. But she should understand this: if Vladimir would go on that way he would run the risk of expulsion.

CHAPTER VIII

"At last my tomboy's come back! Where were you fighting? At Party Headquarters? What did they say there?"

Vladimir met Vasya on the stairs. He must have been waiting for her at the window.

He listened to Vasya's report, walking up and down the room and smoking. His face was worried. "You say they're accusing me of keeping up two households. And suppose I had five households. What business is it of theirs, the hypocrites? My accounts are in order, I'm not stealing any goods or accepting any bribes; what in the world do they want?"

And again Vasya didn't bother about the significance of "two households."

She remained firm concerning Savelyev. That would have to stop. Let him go to the office, but keep him out of the house. She also inquired about the workingmen: Was it really true that Vladimir was foul-mouthed and abusive?

"That's fiction pure and simple. Nonsense. Defamation. Of course, it happens that I shout at them, or even curse them. But it's all for the cause and never without a reason. They can't be left to them-

selves. Especially the shippers—a lazy, dull-witted group."

Vasya didn't tell Vladimir that he was threatened with expulsion. He was sufficiently depressed without that. But now she determined to organize the household properly. Simpler food, no more unnecessary guests. Vladimir would have to get rid of the horse he had bought. Why did he need a horse when he had the car?

Vladimir flared up again. It was a well-broken saddle horse, would even take a side saddle! "It's impossible to get such a thing nowadays. It was a special opportunity, and a great bargain. Today a horse represents capital."

"Capital? Have you any intention of becoming a capitalist? Don't joke that way, Vladimir! You may have to weep over it later."

"Do you think they'll throw me out of the Party? What's become of the Party, that it's expelling people for 'moral' reasons? Let them do it. I'll work with the economic organization."

Seeing that his temper was running away with him, Vasya did not contradict. She only insisted that everything would have to be changed. Everything would have to become simpler, quieter. And, most important of all, they would have to avoid all objectionable relationships. She promised to speak with Michailo Pavlovitch again. If it came to the worst she would go to see Toporkov in Moscow.

Sitting there on the window sill Vasya looked so pale and thin. Nothing but eyes. And even her eyes were not happy.

Vladimir looked at her. Throwing his cigarette to the floor, he walked over to her, put his arms about her, and pressed her close, close.

"Vasya, you dear friend of mine. Don't desert me, Vasya, not now. Help me, advise me. I know that I'm to blame. Not before them—before you!"

He laid his head on her knee, like a little boy.

"How are you to blame, Volodya?"

He hesitated.

"Don't you understand, Vasya? Don't you feel it?"

"Because you're harming yourself? Because you're betraying your proletarianism? Don't accuse yourself before me, but before yourself."

"Oh, Vasya, Vasya." Vladimir turned away, as though he were disappointed. Abruptly changing the subject, he asked: "Is dinner ready? I want to eat. I haven't had a bite since morning."

* * * * *

Vasya was returning from a meeting. She was working with the girls of the hemp-binding works, and was helping the woman in charge of the organization work to get the factory going. She was working with the crowd again, quite naturally, as if she were at home. Michailo Pavlovitch saw a good deal of her,

and she had become friends with his "boys." The group was not exactly homogeneous, but they stuck together, "fought" against the Chairman of the Provincial Committee, and objected to the policy of the "economists." Their admiration was centered on a former workingman who had become the manager of the steel foundry. He was one of their "own people." He hadn't dissociated himself from the crowd or taken on "the manner of a military governor."

Vladimir's case had not yet come up for trial. Michailo Pavlovitch said that new material had come in, and that it wasn't favorable. He advised Vasya to warn Vladimir. He really must be more cautious, must avoid Savelyev. Savelyev's reputation wasn't of the best. Let the "economists" protest as much as they wanted, the G. P. U. wouldn't permit him to run about at large much longer.

Vasya's mind was troubled. She was suffering for Vladimir. Particularly just now. He was working from morning to night. And as soon as he came home he would settle down with his accounts. The Central Administration had ordered him to reorganize the bookkeeping system. He had taken on a specialist, a bank employee, to help him; and the two of them would be bending over the books till three o'clock in the morning. Vladimir had grown thin, and did not sleep well. It was only natural, with his twofold cares. He held a responsible post, and had the intrigues and

gossip to worry about besides. Vasya's heart ached for him. It was overflowing with tenderness for him.

They received no more guests. Nor was anything heard of Savelyev. He must have gone away. It was better thus. Vladimir had stopped going to the theatre, no longer visited his friends. He spent all his evenings at home. Troubled, silent, gloomy.

Vasya didn't know how to take his mind off his worries, how to make his work easier for her man, her friend.

She could forget him only in the hemp-binding works, while she worked for the Party. The factory girls led a wretched life. They earned very little. There had been no time to look over the rates, and the pay was in arrears. The administration was not able to manage. Silly fools! Vasya besieged them, stood up for the interests of the shop girls. She had set their union going, and had brought the matter as far as the accounting department.

She was kept very busy at the factory. She would forget everything else, and the day would be over before she realized it. One evening Vasya was walking home with the organizer, Lisa Sorokina. Lisa was a working-girl, young and sensible. Vasya liked her. As they walked they worked out a plan. Whom should they arouse to action, so that the accounting department would be given a push forward in the matter?

They reached Vasya's house almost before she knew

it. As she went in Vladimir came to meet her. He was quite different now. Gay, his eyes shining, sparkling with delight.

The moment Vasya came in he put his arms around her.

"Congratulate me, Vasyuk. There's a letter from Moscow. I'm getting a new position. An advancement. I'm to be at the head of an entire district. We'll have to stay here about two months longer, until I've finished up everything. And then we'll see what our S. C. will do. What will the Chairman say?"

"Don't be too happy about it. The action against you might come in between."

"Nonsense. The Central Administration wouldn't let them insult me any more. You don't realize that I've become a most important personality." Elated as a boy, he fondled Vasya and kissed her. "You tireless tomboy of mine, I'm so happy that I've brought a present for you, too."

He took her into the bedroom. Some blue silk and white batiste lay on the bed.

"Here's some blue silk for a dress. Dress yourself nicely, sweetheart. That grayish-blue will become you. And here's some batiste, for underwear."

"For underwear? What in the world are you thinking of, Volodyka?" Vasya laughed. "This material for underwear?"

"It's just the right thing for that. Soft white batiste for ladies' underwear. You ought to stop wearing that sackcloth stuff. It makes you look like a bag of flour."

"No, I'd rather have some blouses made of it. But as for the silk, you might just as well have not bought it, though it's pretty. And I suppose you paid cash for it? Why are you such a spendthrift?"

Vasya shook her head. Volodya's presents gave her no joy. And they would accuse him of extravagance again. But she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"Don't you like it?" asked Vladimir.

"The material's pretty, of course. But what can I do with it? Use your judgment. Is it for the theatre? Do you want me to go to the theatre with you as the 'manager's lady'?" Vasya laughed as she tried to picture herself in this blue dress. "But I thank you, anyway—thank you for your kindness and your love."

Rising to her toes, she embraced Vladimir, and kissed him long, fervently.

"At least you haven't forgotten how to kiss, Vasyuk! And I was beginning to think you had stopped loving me. You've exiled me from the bedroom. You never come to me, never make love to me."

"But we haven't time for such things, and you aren't in the mood for them."

"And you still love me?"

"I? You?"

"Do you want me to remind you how we used to love each other?"

They laughed, the two of them, as if they had been separated and now had found each other again.

* * * * *

Vasya was hurrying to the factory. On the stairs it occurred to her that she had forgotten Bucharin's "A B C of Communism." It was in Volodya's bookcase. Hurrying back to the study, she opened the glass door. A package fell on the floor, the paper came undone. Vasya stooped down, and felt as if her heart would stop beating. It was a piece of the silk Vladimir had given her, a piece of the same batiste. And a bundle of lace and inserts besides. Why? For whom?

Dimly she remembered: "He's keeping up two households." Impossible. Vasya was afraid to think of it, afraid to look the truth in the face. But her jealousy was aroused.

"He's keeping up two households." He was so variable. Now he would be distant, would hardly look at her, then, again, he would be inordinately affectionate, as if to make good a fault. She remembered that Volodya always smelled of perfume when he returned from the theatre. She recalled how he would always preen himself before the mirror when he went out in the evening. And she thought again of the long-forgotten nurse with the full lips—of that bed . . .

Vasya's eyes grew dim, her hands seemed petrified. Her heart was heavy with unspeakable pain. Volodya, her beloved, her comrade, was betraying her, his friend, his Vasyuk. He had other women—behind her back—while she was there. It would have been different if they had not been together. She would ask him no questions then. But this way! He caressed Vasya, and she felt that they were one, felt it with all her heart, with all her love and tenderness.

What could it mean? Didn't he love her any more? That was impossible! Vasya's heart couldn't believe in such anguish. She sought for a straw to which to cling. If he no longer loved her, how could he be so loving and solicitous? Would he have called her? Anyway, how could such a thing happen? How could Volodya stop loving her? They were so close to each other, so intimately bound up with each other. They were friends, comrades. What hadn't they gone through together! And now, again, disaster was looming. Vasya didn't believe in it, refused to believe in it. But the serpent of jealousy dripped its venom into her heart.

Why had he spent so little time at home? Why was he so melancholy, so gloomy? Why didn't Vasya delight him as before? Why had he sought an excuse—her cough—to sleep alone?

The serpent's fangs were sharp, so sharp that Vasya almost moaned with pain. She didn't want to hear its hissing. Vladimir loved her, loved Vasya! He loved

her! Otherwise would he caress her as he had yesterday? And this material might be intended for someone else. Volodya might have bought it for somebody. How did she know that the package belonged to him? There was no evidence. She had simply imagined it.

Vasya was ashamed of her suspicion, of having tried to check up on her husband like an old woman.

But the serpent of jealousy still was gnawing at her. Keep still, you evil snake! When Vladimir would come back she would ask him, would have a long talk with him, so that everything would be explained and she would know the truth.

Taking up the "A B C" she hastened to the hemp-binding works, for it had become very late.

* * * * *

Vasya was hurrying homeward. She was afraid she would be late for dinner. At the factory the serpent in her heart had remained still. But hardly had she reached the street when it stirred again.

"He's keeping up two households." Two pieces of silk, two pieces of batiste. How did Volodya know that this material was used for underwear? And who used it? Girls of easy virtue, and Nep-women with easily earned money. What had he called Vasya's things? Sackcloth—flour-bags. But what difference could underwear make? Hadn't he loved her in this underwear? And in the old days he wouldn't have

left her alone the day she came. A meeting, he had said. But why had he dressed so carefully before the mirror? Why had he smelled of perfume? Why did he no longer look at Vasya with tenderly mischievous eyes? She would ask him when she got home: This is how matters stand. Tell me the truth. For whom is the material? Why did you hide it in the book-case? If it had been bought for someone else he would have thrown it on the table. No evasions! No lies! That I'd never forgive!

Vasya ran up the steps, and rang the bell. She was in a hurry.

The automobile was standing before the door, so Vladimir must be at home. She would go to him at once, and demand an answer. She wouldn't forgive deception. She wouldn't permit him to play with her as husbands played with their unloved, lawfully-wedded wives.

Vasya became flushed with her anger. Why didn't someone open the door?

She heard the bolt being pushed back. At last!

"There are guests from Moscow," Marya Semyonovna told her. "Six people. And they're all supposed to get enough to eat. That's not so easily done!"

"Guests? Who are they?"

She heard voices in the drawing room. Animated conversation. Vladimir was there too, playing the host. He introduced his wife, Vassilissa Dementyevna.

The guests were members of the syndicate; they had brought a new program for the work.

Vassilissa would have liked to ask them for news from Moscow, and about the political litigation that everybody was interested in at the moment. But Marya Semyonovna was in the doorway, beckoning mysteriously, calling Vasya. She must need help. Vassya, the boy, had been sent for wine; Ivan Ivanovitch had gone to fetch entrées. And the worthy Marya Semyonovna was in despair. She had to cook and to set the table. Vasya would have to help her, for Vladimir wanted everything to be just so. The table should look well.

Both the women worked hard. It was a good thing that Ivan Ivanovitch returned, and also helped.

Vasya had no time to think of the blue silk. And the serpent in her heart gave no sign of life, seemed to be gone. Vasya wanted only to help her man so that he would make a good impression on the members of the syndicate.

The errand-boy, Vassya, came back, all out of breath, with the wine. Ivan Ivanovitch uncorked the bottles. The table looked splendid enough for Easter. There were appetizers, wines, flowers, Morosov napkins, silver cutlery.

The guests were asked to come in. Vladimir glanced anxiously at the table, and seemed content. But why didn't he at least look gratefully at Vasya? She had tried so hard. She felt hurt, offended.

Vasya conversed with her guests. But she could not stop thinking of that blue silk. For whom was it intended? For whom?

She glanced at Volodya. She saw him with different eyes, as though he were a stranger. And if he were close to her, if he belonged to her, he would have pitied her. He would never have let that accursed serpent enter her heart.

Vasya was tormented throughout the evening. At night she had to put up the visitors. She sent the errand-boy for pillows, and arranged a dormitory in the study. There she couldn't help looking at that damned book-case again and again. The blue material was lying there. For whom? For whom?

She was exhausted. She had served tea. The guests spoke only of their own affairs, of various kinds of goods, of different methods of packing, of specifications and calculations.

They were business men. They had been merchants. Among them were two Communists who were seeking their salvation in trade. Real "Red merchants".

Vladimir grew animated. He was proud of his business, of being ahead of all the others. His business was barely a month old, but it was developing. The merchants' respect for him was evident. Everybody listened to him. No one paid any attention to the other members of the administration.

Vasya watched them. Under ordinary circumstances

she would have been happy for Vladimir. But today he seemed a stranger. Business, nothing but business, not a thought of her. Nor did he see how weary her spirit was after this day. And if he had deceived her, lied to her, might he not be a little crooked in business? Might not the Party Committee be justified in calling him to account?

And what didn't these syndicate people discuss! If only she could be alone with Vladimir. If only she could find out something about the blue material.

Vasya undressed for the night, and waited for Vladimir. He was to sleep with her that night, for the syndicate people had taken possession of all the other rooms. She listened for his steps. The guests had already said good-night. Now he was only giving Ivan Ivanovitch instructions for the morning.

He was coming. Vasya's heart pounded, her knees trembled. She sat down on the bed. She would ask him as soon as he came in.

But Vladimir gave her no chance to ask her question; he was too full of news himself. He wanted her advice: how should they reorganize the machine so as to strengthen the Communists, so that the members of the Party would prevail over the members of the syndicate, over the *burshui?*

"Advise me, Vasya. Think it over carefully. Tomorrow we'll go over the new project together. But first you read over the program by yourself, and think about it. These 'bay-windows' would like to get the

power; they're secretly plotting against us proletarians. Let them plot! We weren't born yesterday, either. It's our job to construct the machine so that nothing can be done without the Party, without the Communists."

"Then why don't you follow the Party regulations? Don't you often say that expulsion from the Party isn't the worst thing that can happen to you, that you can live without the Party?"

"Oh, one can say so many things without meaning them," laughed Vladimir. "You understand that. But how can one live without the Party? Will we ever leave it?"

Vladimir spoke thoughtfully, pulling off his shoes the while. "If only I had this stupid case off my chest. And how we'll live, Vasya—wonderfully. You'll see what a model Communist I'll be as soon as I'm transferred to another district. And I won't have any more fights with the Chairman. I'll be so good they'll canonize me."

Volodya was happy, not sulky as he had been so often in the last few days. His eyes were again laughing mischievously.

"Let's go to sleep."

Vladimir wanted to put out the light, but Vasya held his hand.

"No, wait. . . . I have to . . . I want to ask you something . . ."

She raised herself on her elbow, the better to see his face. Her heart pounded, her voice sounded curiously unfamiliar. Vladimir started.

"Go ahead. What is it?"

He was looking not at Vasya, but at the wall.

"I wanted to ask you. Why do you have material lying in your book-case? Silk—and batiste?"

"Silk? Do you mean the samples?"

"No, not samples. A piece, a big piece, exactly the same as the one you gave me. . . . For whom? . . ."

She stared into Vladimir's face.

"You want to know for whom it is? Can't you guess, really?"

"No."

"Ivan Ivanovitch asked me to get the same stuff for his fiancée. He wants to have everything I have, you know. He copies me in everything."

He explained it so simply, so calmly, that the blood rushed to Vasya's face. She was ashamed of herself.

"Ivan Ivanovitch? His fiancée? And I thought . . ."

"What did you think?" laughed Vladimir, turning to face her.

"You dear sweet darling of mine! My Volodyka."

Vasya kissed him. How could she have thought of such a thing? How could she have doubted him? Suspected her friend?

"Why, what did you think? Oh, you little detective! Such a cross-examiner."

Volodya put his arms about Vasya. But his eyes seemed worried.

"And now to bed, no more kissing. We'll have a hard time getting through with our work tomorrow anyway, on account of the guests. We'll have to get up early."

He put out the light.

Vasya felt a load off her heart. But the moment he was asleep the serpent stirred again. Why did he call me a little detective? And a cross-examiner? There must be something to be found out!

Vladimir slept soundly. But Vasya lay there curled up like a porcupine, wide awake, staring into the dark.

To believe or not to believe? To believe or not to believe?

* * * * *

The syndicate people had gone. Now Vladimir's work was doubled. The work of reorganization caused him endless worries. But there had been a joyful compensation. Michailo Pavlovitch had called Vasya to his room, and told her of some secret instructions from the Central Administration. As the manager could not be accused of any real offense, and as the whole thing practically amounted only to insubordination and improper behavior, the matter was to be hushed up as quietly and unobtrusively as possible.

Vasya drew a breath of relief, almost fell back into

her old habit of saying "Thank God." She barely succeeded in controlling herself.

Michailo Pavlovitch was glad, too. On Vasya's account. He liked her, and felt sorry for her.

Vasya, however, was unsuccessful. The accounting department had decided in favor of the management. The girls of the hemp-binding shop grew restless. A strike seemed imminent. Working under the cloak of Bolsheviki unaffiliated with the Party, the Mensheviki were doing their best to fan the flames.

Although she coughed and felt feverish, she was at the works every day. She fought against the management, insisted, demanded concessions. Then, again, she sought to calm the shop girls. And her work absorbed her so completely that she forgot the blue silk entirely. She had no time for it. Only once did the serpent in her heart give a sign of life; it had gained a firm foothold there and wasn't easy to drive out.

This time it was the dog, the white poodle.

Vassya, the boy, had brought it home. It wore a silk bow between its ears.

"Whose dog is that? Why did you bring it here? Where does it come from?"

Vassya replied that Vladimir Ivanovitch had given him orders to keep the dog in the house for the time being. It belonged to Savelyev, who had gone out of town, leaving the poodle alone and neglected in the empty house.

Surprised, Vasya wondered about Vladimir's sudden liking for dogs. Did he want to do Savelyev a favor? And her resentment against Savelyev was aroused again. Why did Vladimir continue being friends with him, with this speculator, this thief?

When Vladimir came, the poodle rushed to meet him as though it had found a long-lost master. Petting it, Vladimir began to talk to it.

"Where does the dog come from, Volodya? Is it Savelyev's?"

"Why, no! It belongs to Ivan Ivanovitch's fiancée. She's gone out of town and Ivan Ivanovitch asked me to keep it here for a while."

"But Vassya said it belongs to Savelyev."

"Nonsense! It's true that the dog was in Savelyev's house for the past few days. Vassya took it from there. That's why he thinks it belongs to Savelyev."

Vasya listened as if she understood everything clearly.

But the serpent stirred, gripped her heart in its coils. Should she believe him?

The moment Ivan Ivanovitch came Vasya flew at him. Whose poodle was it?

With great detail, Ivan Ivanovitch told her of his fiancée, who had asked him to care for her poodle. But how could he do it? He never was at home. So he sent it to Savelyev. There, however, there were only the servants, who would go away and lock the poodle in the house.

It might have been true.
But Vasya didn't like the poodle.

* * * * *

Vladimir Ivanovitch had gone away for a few days. Something about the syndicate. Vasya was alone. She had thought she would be lonely and sad. But it was different. Though she was alone she seemed to feel happier, more free. She was relieved of the burden which, in Vladimir's presence, weighted her down like a stone. And she no longer felt the depressing disregard of Volodya, who ignored her as if she didn't exist at all. She knew he was busy, that his head was full of other things; but her heart, her silly woman's heart was sad, longed for affection.

She was better off without Vladimir. When she was alone there was nothing to do about it. She expected nothing, listened for nothing, didn't feel hurt.

She invited her friends to her house: Lisa Sorokina, the factory boys, Michailo Pavlovitch. She gave a supper party. She was happy when she entertained her friends.

After supper they discussed Party affairs, went into the garden, sang together. It was beautiful. Everyone was gay, but Vasya most of all. Quite different, this, from the conversations with the syndicate people, or with Savelyev, in the drawing room. She hardly

noticed how quickly the days of Vladimir's absence passed.

He came home on an early morning train, and found Vasya at the tea table.

Jumping to her feet, Vasya hurried to meet him. He didn't kiss her, but he pressed her hand to his lips for a long time. When he raised his head she saw tears in his eyes. Her heart grew heavy.

"What's the matter, Volodya? Has something happened again?"

"No, Vasya, nothing's happened. It's only . . . life is so hard for me, Vasya. I'm so tired of it all."

He sat down at the table, leaned his head on his hand, and let his tears flow freely.

"But what's the trouble, Volodya? What is it? Please tell me, dear, you'll feel better."

"Will I, Vasya?" he asked wretchedly. "I've been turning it over and over in my mind; I've been wondering . . . I've gone through so much, Vasya. No, things can't become better. There's no way out."

And again Vasya's heart was convulsed in an agony of fear.

"Don't torment me, Volodya! Tell me the truth. I can't go on this way any longer. I'm tired—I can't rest . . ."

She could not go on, for she began to cough.

"There! You're coughing again! How can I talk to you?" Was it a reproach or was it sorrow that she heard in Volodya's voice?

And Vasya coughed. His annoyance plainly showing in his face, Vladimir lighted a cigarette.

"Why don't you drink some tea? That might stop it," he advised her.

"No, I'll take some of my medicine."

Her fit of coughing over, Vasya gave Vladimir some tea, and he told her again, in his ordinary tone, how difficult it was to keep things going. The shipping clerks had just raised a row. They demanded higher pay for overtime, although their usual wages had been reduced. The syndicate was losing money on their account, but they were threatening to strike if their pay was not raised. Possibly it was the work of agitators. After all, one could not see everything.

"Ivan Ivanovitch came with his report the moment I stepped out of the train, and you expect me to be happy! I go away for a couple of days, and I come back to find a fight on my hands. What in the world do the other members of the administration do? They shouldn't have let the matter go so far. Now there'll be trouble. And the Chairman has found something new, too."

"So that's why you said life was so hard, and that there's no way out? On account of the shipping clerks?"

"Why, of course! What did you think?"

Puffing at his cigarette, Vladimir slowly stirred his tea, and spoke of the dispute again. How could it be

smoothed over without a public scandal? But Vasya listened only half-heartedly. Should she believe him? Had he really wept only on account of the shipping clerks? It wasn't like him. He had something else on his mind. The blue silk . . . Vladimir might really be tired. The S. C. had tormented him so that now every little thing could make him lose control of himself. She was trying to convince herself, to believe that Vladimir's worries were of a purely business nature. It was the members of the administration who were to blame for this business of the shipping clerks.

CHAPTER IX

At last Vasya had carried her point at the hemp-binding works. She had succeeded in obtaining concessions from the management. The shop girls were jubilant, escorted Vasya to her door. But she knew that matters would never have turned out so well without the Chairman. She had come to esteem him. He was inflexible, and anything but indulgent toward the economists.

When she reached her house Vasya found the entire courtyard full of shipping clerks. A babel of voices, disputing, shouting. "The highest rates! No concessions! Or we'll stop work! Let the managers and office clerks do the loading!"

Vasya mingled with the crowd, listening, asking questions.

They recognized her, surrounded her, drowned her voice. Everybody wanted to tell her all about it at once. Their pay was too low, and they got nothing for overtime. The accounts were not drawn up correctly. They crowded about Vasya, uttered threats against the management. Wasn't she the manager's wife? Let her explain the whole business to him. There could be no family considerations in a case of this sort.

Vasya listened and asked questions. She knew and understood their grievances well. The managers and office employes were well treated and well fed, but the shipping clerks were slaves. Their children had nothing to wear. Things couldn't be permitted to go on that way; the union would have to exert pressure on the management. Nothing could be done without organization and a program. The leaders came forward to arrive at an understanding with Vasya. They would state their demands on paper. And if the management were to refuse all concessions, they would appeal directly to the accounting department.

Vasya's blood was up. Forgetting her position as the manager's wife she took the shipping clerks' cause as her own. How could she help supporting "her own people" with word and deed? They were an inexperienced mob, inefficiently led.

She asked the leaders into the house, there to formulate their demands.

They went in, the shipping clerks looking askance at the manager's house furnishings as they went through the reception rooms into Vasya's bedroom. Only then it occurred to Vasya that she should not have brought the men into the house. But it was too late to turn back.

They sat down at Vasya's table and drew up their demands.

There was less noise in the court-yard, no more

shouting. The men had separated into groups, were talking and smoking.

Then suddenly the uproar began again. An auto had stopped before the house. The manager. He was entering the court-yard.

"What sort of business is this? You're holding a meeting here? You've come here to make threats? You're dissatisfied?" Vladimir's voice rumbled like thunder. "I haven't the slightest intention of negotiating with you here! This is my private residence. Go to the office. You don't like the accounting? Go to the union! The management has nothing to do with that. It has other things to worry about. You're going to strike? That's your affair. Go ahead and strike, if the union says so. But get out of here this very moment. I won't listen to you. I'll see you in the office!"

Vladimir banged the door, and, going through the house, went directly to Vasya, to the bedroom.

When he came in he stopped as though paralyzed. Vasya was sitting at the table with the shipping clerks, "drawing up" demands.

"And what's this? Who let you in here? How did you dare come in here without permission? Get out of here! Get out!"

"But Vladimir Ivanovitch, we didn't come in on our own hook. . . . Your wife . . ."

"Get out, I say, or . . ."

Vladimir was white as a sheet; he was raising his arm. The men retreated toward the door.

"Are you crazy, Vladimir? How dare you! I called them in! Stop, Comrades! Where are you going?"

Vasya ran after them, but Vladimir stepped in her way and grasped her arm so tightly that she cried out.

"You invited them? Who gave you permission? Who asked you to meddle in my affairs? You're not responsible to the syndicate! If you want to start any strikes, go to your hemp-binding works!"

"Oh! So you're driving me away? Because I'm siding with my brothers. Because I want the truth. Because I don't consider your managerial interests, because I lower your bonus."

"You should be ashamed of yourself. You disgusting hypocrite."

Vasya felt as if he had lashed her with a whip. Disgusting? She, Vasya, was disgusting?

They faced each other furiously, like enemies. But her heart was filled with agonizing, excruciating pain. Was her happiness gone forever?

The shipping clerks had dispersed, and Vladimir had gone to the office. Lying across the bed, her face buried in the quilt, Vasya was letting her tears wet the silk. But her sorrow could not be relieved by tears.

She was heartbroken, not at his having called her disgusting, but at their estrangement, their inability to

understand each other. Like enemies, in two hostile camps.

The days that followed were dismal, cheerless. Vladimir spent much time at home. But what good did that do? They were just like strangers, spoke only when it was absolutely necessary. Each lived his own life. Vasya was ill again. Ivan Ivanovitch had gone for the doctor, who had ordered a complete rest for her, and had forbidden all excitement.

Vladimir was very busy with his work. He would sit up half the night in his study with Ivan Ivanovitch and the bookkeeper. They would come out for supper, but their thoughts were wrapped in their business; they were taciturn and in bad humor.

Occasionally Lisa Sorokina would visit Vasya to tell her about the hemp-binding works. The girls were sorry that she was ill.

Yet her illness did not distress Vasya as much as the knowledge that she and Volodya had become estranged. Neither could forget the quarrel about the shipping-clerks. Neither could forgive the other.

Vasya thought of going home to her province. She wanted to be back home. But where could she go? Grusha was living in her attic under the roof; it would be very crowded for two. She could not think of going to her parents to recuperate, for they would weep over her, and would rail against the Bolsheviki. Where, then? Vasya wrote to Grusha, asking her to get a room for her. And she wrote to Stepan Alexeyevitch,

asking him to procure some work for her, with the Party, with the masses. She would go as soon as she heard from them. Why should she stay here? No one needed her. Volodya would get along without her. The days dragged, slowly, heavily.

It was midsummer. The cherries in the garden were ripe; the plums were covered with a purplish bloom. The lilies, white and delicate, shone on their tall, dewy stalks. But nothing delighted Vasya now. As she wandered through the garden she would remember how she had lain in the chaise longue in the spring, how glad she had been that she was alive. And the memory made her heart even heavier.

She felt as if she had been quite another Vasya then, a young, confiding Vasya. Something had gone out of her. What was it? She didn't know exactly. But this much was certain. It had gone out of her, and would never come back.

Sometimes Vladimir would stand at the window and watch Vasya walking about the garden, indifferent, drooping. He would stand at the window a while; then, turning away abruptly, would return to Ivan Ivanovitch and his work.

Then Vasya would sigh with fresh disappointment. She had expected him to come down to her, to the garden. And he hadn't come. There it was. It was clear that he had no more feeling for her. To him business was more important than the anguish of a woman's heart.

* * * * *

Some noise woke Vasya. It was morning. Vladimir was rummaging in his wardrobe, taking out something.

"What are you doing there so early, Volodya?"

"I have to meet a train, there's a consignment coming in."

"Must you go yourself?"

"I have to supervise."

Vladimir was standing before the mirror, putting on his new tie; but he couldn't quite manage it. As Vasya looked at him she suddenly felt once more that he was so close, so deeply bound to her.

"Come here, Volodya. Let me help you."

He came obediently, sat down on the bed. Vasya made his tie. They looked at each other, and suddenly, without a word, they were in each other's arms.

"My little Vasyuk! My darling. It hurts so to live beside you, and yet so terribly far away. Can't it be different?" he asked plaintively, pressing Vasya's curly head to his breast.

"Do you think it doesn't hurt me? I don't want to live any more."

"But why do we quarrel, Vasyuk?"

"I don't know. There's some barrier between us."

"No, Vasya. No, nothing can stand between us. My heart is all yours, only yours."

"And you haven't stopped loving me?"

"You silly little thing." He kissed her. "Come, let's stop quarreling. It's stupid, and makes both of

us suffer. And I can't afford to lose you, Vasya. I can't live without you. So now we won't hurt each other any more?"

"You won't try to play a managerial rôle any more?"

"And you won't set the shipping clerks against me?"

They laughed.

"But now you go to sleep. If you don't sleep you'll be sick again for the day. I'll be back in about two hours."

Covering her, he kissed her eyes and went. Vasya felt happy, light of heart. She fell asleep as if all her joy had come back to her, as if she had lost nothing.

Vladimir didn't come back from the station, but telephoned that he would have to go to the office. He would be back for dinner. Vasya was feeling better, but she didn't go to the hemp-binding works. Instead, she busied herself about the house, helping Marya Semyonovna to straighten up the house.

Not long before dinner the telephone rang. Vasya answered.

"Hello."

"Is Vladimir Ivanovitch at home?"

"No, not yet. Who's speaking?"

"The administrative office."

"But why do you call here? He's still in your office."

"No, he's not here; he left the office some time ago. Please forgive me."

That woman's voice again. Who was it? Vasya didn't like that voice. During the first few days of

her stay it had called often. Then it had stopped. Vasya once asked Ivan Ivanovitch, quite casually, who it might be that was forever telephoning from the office, and during working hours at that. Ivan Ivanovitch explained that it was the clerks. Queer, that their voices should be so much alike. And again Vasya felt the serpent's fangs.

Vladimir brought home two members of the administration for dinner.

They discussed the morning's consignments. Nevertheless he found time to ask how Vasya was feeling, whether she had been sunning herself, as the doctor had ordered.

"No, I didn't lie in the sun."

Dryly Vasya brought the conversation to a close, adding carelessly:

"The young lady who's forever phoning you from the office called again."

"What young lady?" Vladimir looked surprised. "From the office, you say? Then it must be the Shelgunov woman—some young lady, that one! A venerable materfamilias. You've seen her, Vasya—the fat woman with the wart on her face."

He spoke so simply, so naturally. But Vasya felt uneasy.

No. Something was wrong there.

After dinner the gentlemen of the management went away. Vasya was glad. She wanted to be alone with

Vladimir, to warm her spirit. The morning's promise of joy would be fulfilled.

But the guests had hardly left when the telephone buzzed in the study. Vladimir went to answer it.

"Yes, it's I." Curtly, "Didn't I ask you not to telephone?"

A short laugh. "Family matters, of course." Reproachfully, "By no means, I forbid it most decidedly." Vehemently, "All right, all right." Relenting, "But not for long. Good-bye."

Vasya was in the next room, listening.

With whom was he speaking? Whom did he promise: "But not for long?" To whom could he say: "I forbid it."

Vladimir went from the study straight into the bedroom, passing Vasya as though he didn't see her. She followed him. He was standing before the mirror, combing his hair.

"To whom were you speaking, Volodya?"

"To Savelyev."

"To Savelyev? Has he come back?"

"This morning."

"Did you meet him?"

"Look here, what sort of cross-examination is this? You know I was supervising the unloading of a shipment this morning." He seemed disturbed.

"And you're going to him right away? Did you promise?"

"Yes, I'm going there."

Silence.

Vasya felt her heart hammering, pounding. As if it would burst. If only it would. She could endure this agony no longer. She went quickly over to Vladimir, gently took his hand. "Don't do that, Volodya. Don't start that business again. . . ."

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously, uneasily.

"Don't have anything to do with that crooked speculator. I've been warned. After all, that's the principal thing they have against you, your association with objectionable people."

"Ah. There you go again. Talking like one of your Supervisory Committee. Do you insist on tormenting me? Tyrannizing me? Do you want to tie me to your apron strings?"

Flushed, he pushed Vasya's hand away.

"Stop, Vladimir. Stop. What did you say? Did I ever attempt to chain you to me? Try to keep your head. I'm talking about you, not myself. Don't dig a pit for yourself. You have enemies enough. And if you resume your friendship with Savelyev . . ."

"What has Savelyev to do with this?"

"What do you mean? What has he to do with this? Aren't you going to him?" Vasya's eyes were troubled.

"Of course I'm going to him. But what of it? Can't you understand that I'm going to him on business? It can't be helped."

"I don't believe you," she cried hotly. "Postpone it for tomorrow, tell him to come to the office."

"What a child you are, Vasya," he said, altering his tone. "All right, I'll tell you the truth. It's true that Savelyev didn't call me over to discuss business. That can be attended to in the office. He's simply having a jolly little crowd at his house. And he asked me to come over for a game of cards. You know yourself, Vasya, that I went nowhere for almost a month. I was at home, and taken up with business, all the time. Let me get a breath of air for a change, Vasya. I'm young. I want to live. I can't be a hermit."

"I understand, Volodya," she said sadly. "Yes, everything's as you say. And your getting a little diversion is no calamity. But you must understand one thing. You mustn't start up again with this Savelyev, this speculating scoundrel. You have no respect for him yourself. What do you need him for? People will be saying right away that Vladimir Ivanovitch and Savelyev are hand and glove again. And then the whole business'll start all over again. Volodya darling. Please don't go there today. Cancel it."

"What nonsense!" Volodya was losing his patience. "If the Provincial Committee has nothing to do but take legal action against a fellow because of his acquaintances, then it's no Provincial Committee but a cesspool. You're exaggerating, Vasya."

"But I don't like to see you go there. I know he can't stand me. He asks you over only to hurt me. Didn't I hear you say over the phone that you couldn't come on account of your family? And then you laughed. Volodya . . ." She was becoming agitated. "It hurts me to see you laughing with a stranger about me, and with Savelyev at that. As if I didn't let you go."

"Well. You don't."

"So that's how you put it. Very well, then, go! But remember . . .," her eyes flashed. "Remember that my patience is at an end. I've helped you, suffered for you, stood up for you. That's enough. Go if you want to. But then I'll know what I have to do." Her voice rose to a shrill, hysterical shriek.

"I'm sick of your hysterics! Why do you nag me—what do you want of me?"

"Volodya!" There were tears in Vasya's voice. "I've never asked you for anything. But today I beg you to stay. For your sake, and mine."

"Oh, you women. You're all the same. Disgusting." Rushing past her, he hurried through the hall; the front door banged. The motor purred.

* * * * *

"I've come to you, Lisa. Take me in. I've gone away from him forever."

Her voice failed her, but her eyes were dry. Her misery was too great for tears.

"You've come away from him? You should have done it long ago! We've all been wondering that you've stood it so long . . ."

"We've become estranged, Lisa. That's the terrible thing," wailed Vasya.

"Of course. How in the world can you love him?"

Vasya ignored the question. She could hardly believe what had happened. She could never forgive, never forget this indignity. It had been the first time she had begged him for something. And what had he done? He might just as well have walked over her dead body. And why? Why? To play cards with that thief, that speculator, Savelyev, and a crowd of his filthy fellows! It was all the same to him that Vasya was dying of grief. As long as he was having a good time, as long as he was getting the entertainment he wanted. Was that love? Was that her friend and comrade? Was that a Communist?

Lisa was unable to make head or tail out of Vasya's incoherent speech. What had happened? What did Savelyev have to do with it?

"What does he have to do with it? Why, it was all on his account, on account of that crooked speculator. Vladimir went to him."

"You think he went to him?"

"Why, to whom do you think? Don't you believe it?"

"But what is there to believe? The whole town knows it; only you seem to be blind. Or do you refuse to see it? Do you refuse to realize it?"

"See what, Lisa? Tell me!"

"Why, that your Vladimir has a friend!"

"A friend?"

Vasya did not understand at once, but stared at Lisa. She was neither shocked nor grieved, but only surprised.

"A friend you say. Who is it?"

"Not one of us, not a working girl. One of the office employees."

"Do you know her?"

"I've seen her. The whole town knows her."

"Why?"

"She's always so dressed up. That's why the Comrades are so angry at your Vladimir. Michailo Pavlovitch told you of this friendship, too. How could you help knowing about it? You're not so stupid otherwise. But in this affair you've acted like a real goose!"

Vasya, however, was concerned with something quite different.

"Does he love her?"

"How should I know? He must love her; he's been running around with her for so many months. People thought the affair would stop when you came. But nothing of the sort. He's forever going to her in his car."

"Does she have a home of her own?"

"The chances are it's more elaborate than yours."

So that's what it was. "He's keeping up two households."

Now Vasya understood everything. Everything but one point. Why had Volodya lied to her, tormented her, deceived her?

"What do you expect? Was he to come to you as the contrite sinner? Or was he to beg you for permission to visit his friend? It was your business to see it. If you didn't, you were a fool, and have only yourself to blame."

"Why do you insist on talking about my being a fool, Lisa? That's not important. The question is this: Does he really love her, or does it only look like it?"

"How do you mean? I don't know what you're talking about! He must love her. Doesn't he support her entirely, and give her expensive presents?"

"Do you think so? But, you see, I don't know. . . ."

"You surely don't believe that he loves you? Don't fool yourself, Vasya. It'll only hurt you all the more. He likes and esteems you, of course. You're his wife and comrade. But as for loving you. That was over long ago. I know."

Vasya shook her head. "But, you see, I don't agree with you."

Her stupidity annoyed Lisa, who now told her about Volodya's friend. Beautiful as a picture. And her

clothes. Always dressed in silks and always surrounded by admirers. Savelyev was one of them; knew her well. It was very gay there in the evening. And there were rumors that both Vladimir and Savelyev were keeping her.

For some reason or other this idea was particularly distasteful to Vasya.

Had Vladimir actually changed so? Could he really love a woman like that? Vasya didn't believe the stories she heard. She didn't believe them. Something was wrong there.

Lisa, however, was offended. "All right, don't believe me. It's your own affair. Ask anybody; everyone'll tell you the same thing. She was in the office as Savelyev's secretary, until she let the manager keep her. But it's possible that others are making use of her, too. They're talking about Ivan Ivanovitch, too. And some members of the administration visit there occasionally. She's a real one, only not registered. Her luck that they don't have to have permits nowadays."

"But Vladimir would never have fallen in love with a woman like that," objected Vasya.

"Why do you think that? Men like that kind, especially men like your Vladimir. You can see it in his face: the worse the woman, the better he'll like her."

"Be still, Lisa! How dare you! You don't know him. How can you judge him like this?"

"Why do you stand up for him? Didn't he make

you the laughing stock of the town? But you, you defend him like a fortress!"

"Made me a laughing stock! And how, if you please? What have Vladimir's actions to do with me? I'm not responsible for him. You don't understand, Lisa. That isn't why I'm suffering. That's not it at all."

"I know. You're suffering because he doesn't love you any more."

"No, Lisa, that's not it, either. It hurts, of course. But it's not the most important thing. I know what I mean, but I can't find the words. What is it? We were such comrades, so close and intimate and suddenly you say: Vladimir turned away from me, lied to me, was afraid of me. Of me! How could he? Would I have stood in his way? Would I have kept him from his love? He couldn't, Volodya couldn't think that! There must be something else. He can't love that girl so much."

"Now you're beating about the bush," said Lisa, waving her away angrily. "It's impossible to talk to you. You're still in love with Volodya: 'Strike me, wipe your feet on me—it's all the same to me, I'm still your obedient wife—I'll lick your boots'—I'm not like that. I'd have got even with him long ago. I'd have given him something to think about."

Vasya didn't deny it. But the more Lisa condemned Vladimir, the more ardently Vasya defended him. She wanted to convince Lisa that he was wrong not in

taking a friend, not in loving another woman, but only in his not having told her, Vasya, about it. As if she weren't his friend and comrade, but a stranger. What was more, she meant less to him than a stranger, for he had no faith in her. Did he think that she would fight for her rights like a legitimate wife?

"You must fight for them," shouted Lisa. "Of course you must fight for them. How dared he make you ridiculous? Then you surely must leave him."

Vasya objected. It was always like that. In her heart she often condemned Vladimir, disagreed with him entirely. But the moment some one else attacked him she took his side and grew indignant. People didn't understand him. She alone knew Vladimir, the American. Only when she said "The American" did the tears come. She remembered Vladimir, the American, leading the members of their group, fighting for the Soviet.

Weeping, she fell in Lisa's arms. She was not thinking of Vladimir, the manager, but she was mourning for the "American," was suffering for him inconsolably, mortally.

"It's so hard for me, Lisenyka. I'm exhausted."

"I know, darling. Only be patient. It'll pass. I went through the same thing last year. But when we meet nowadays it doesn't bother me at all."

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Vasya was unable to sleep, although Lisa had given her her own bed, sleeping on a couple of chairs herself. Lisa had worked all day; now she was sleeping soundly. Vasya turned restlessly from side to side, now sitting up, now lying down again. She couldn't rest. Countless thoughts raced through her head, tortured and broke her heart. It was like that dreadful night when she had found the bandage, when Vladimir had been arrested.

It wasn't jealousy that was tormenting her. But Volodya's lack of confidence hurt her. If not for that, she would forgive everything. Man cannot control his heart. But Vasya did not believe that he loved the other girl. She did not believe it. It was only a "liaison." For months he had lived alone, he of the ardent temperament. (She remembered Styosha.) He had begun an affair with her, and it went on. She probably wouldn't let him go. Lisa, too, said he was a ladies' man. And if it was that, it couldn't be a case of love. Therefore she was looking out for her own advantage. Volodya would have liked to tear himself away, but he could not. Vasya remembered how moody, how variable he had been; now loving, now distant. He had suffered agonies. How could one live with the person one loved while the other was sharpening the knife behind his back? She remembered how frequently Vladimir had tried to confess something, how he had always stopped short. He had been about to say something on the morning of

the clash with the shipping clerks. Vasya had felt he had it on the tip of his tongue. She, too, had been frightened, and unfortunately had begun to cough. Then Vladimir said nothing more; did he, therefore, pity her? And if he pitied her, he loved her. But did he love her? It was easy to say he did. But what about the blue material? The same for both of them?

"I have bought you a present, my beautiful sweetheart; and I haven't forgotten that wearisome wife of mine. Here, take the silk, and say nothing."

Damn him! Vasya clenched her fists as though she wanted to fight with Vladimir. She thought: so he didn't go to Savelyev yesterday? And Savelyev had nothing to do with it. He had been only a screen. Had she known that he had a friend who pretended to love him, she would not have been angry with Vladimir. She would have been unhappy; still, she would have understood. But to humiliate Vasya for that vulgar speculator, Savelyev! She would have understood the affair with his friend; yet, would she have forgiven? As she had forgiven him for the nurse, for Styosha? Would she have been able to like the white poodle, to forget the blue silk?

CHAPTER X

Lisa had hardly left for work in the morning when the door opened and Marya Semyonovna appeared, a black lace shawl wrapped about her head. She was gasping for breath. It was hot—midsummer.

"Good morning, Vassilissa Dementyevna. I'm bringing you a letter from your husband. He wanted me to take a cab, to get here faster. But where can one be found nowadays? I'm all out of breath."

As Vasya tore open the envelope bearing the address of the office, her fingers seemed petrified.

"Vasya! What does this mean? What are you doing to me? Why do you torture me so unmercifully? Do you want a scandal throughout the district to give my enemies new material to ruin me? You've often said you were my friend; but you've joined my foes. You've destroyed my soul. I can't go on with this life. If you no longer love me, say so openly. Why do you stab me from behind? You know I love only you. Everything else everyone says about me is nonsense, ephemeral. Listen to me! I swear to you that I was not with Savelyev yesterday! I swear to you that I kept faith with you where I was yesterday.

My heart beats for you only. I'm all worn out, Vasya. Have pity. Come to me, let me look into your dear eyes and tell you everything. The whole truth! If you're my friend and comrade, you'll come. If not—then, good-bye. But this you must know: that I won't live without you.

"Your wretched Volodya."

Vasya read the letter twice. Now her heart was filled with tenderness, and the tears welled up in her eyes. "Ephemeral." "I love only you." Then again she raged: She had "tortured" him! He asked her to pity him! Had he had pity with her? Had he not tormented her? Her eyes were dry, her pale lips pressed together in a thin line.

"Wretched!" You don't say! Wretched! All night long he had made love to another woman; he had given her blue silk. How she had begged him yesterday: Stay! She had put all her soul into her eyes. But he had pushed her away; had shouted at her like a real lawful husband, and had gone. Now he wrote: "I love only you!" He was lying. He did not love her. A fine sort of love, that! Only pain and bitterness! Yet why had he written "Good-bye! But this you must know: that I won't live without you." Surely he wouldn't . . . ? Nonsense. It was merely a threat, to make her relent, to make her come to him at once, like a fool.

She read the letter once more.

In the meanwhile Marya Semyonovna sat there quite unconcerned, wiping off her perspiration, fanning herself with her handkerchief.

"Vladimir Ivanovitch came home yesterday almost as soon as you had gone. He asked where you were. He went into the study and began to write. About midnight he came into the kitchen to ask whether you had come back. 'No,' I said, and he went away. Then he took Ivan Ivanovitch to the door, and went into the bedroom. He must have seen your note there. I heard him crying like a heart-broken little child. And he didn't lie down all night, but walked around all the time. This morning he didn't even drink tea. 'I don't want anything,' he said to me. 'Go and look for Vassilissa Dementyevna. Go to all her friends, till you find her. Don't you dare come back without her!' "

Vasya listened, aching with the old love for Vladimir. He had waited for her alone through the night, had wept and suffered, had called her, Vasya. And how hard it had been for her. How she had yearned for him. She had been jealous. So the threads that had bound their hearts together were not broken; their love was not gone entirely! Why prolong the agony? Should she go back? Back to him for a good talk?

"What was Vladimir Ivanovitch doing when you left? Was he going to the office?"

"When I left? Why, he was just telephoning to the 'little lady,' probably wanted to tell her his troubles.

Or maybe he wanted her to share in his joy. Who can understand these men? If only there'll be no scandal!"

He had called up the "little lady"? Now? At such a time? He had written a letter to Vasya, and then telephoned to his lady? Lisa might be right. He was clinging to Vasya only to avoid a scandal. If his wife had not been held in such high esteem he would not have bothered about her. And he was calling her only to humiliate her again. No! She had had enough. She would not go to him, would not fall into the trap. Her head was reeling.

"Tell Vladimir Ivanovitch that there's no answer. That's all. And hurry. Please go!"

"I can't go any faster. And it doesn't pay to hurry in such things. You should have thought of this before, Vassilissa Dementyevna. Of course, Vladimir Ivanovitch did wrong by you, for you're his wife; but you aren't altogether in the right either. Who would leave such a young man all alone for months? And if you think about it, Vladimir Ivanovitch is a good husband after all. Always worrying about you. Always wanting to know whether you're drinking your cocoa, whether I've fetched fresh eggs for you. He cares more for your clothes than you do. He's never refused you anything. And where women are concerned—who is blameless there? You're his wife; people respect you. But on the other side? He pays her and gives her presents—that's all."

As Marya Semyonovna spoke Vasya's heart was growing heavier. How simple everything would be if she, too, could think that. But Marya Semyonovna did not understand just what had hurt her. Vladimir was no longer her friend. She had lost faith in him; and how could they live together without faith?

"Don't you think you ought to wait till evening, Vassilissa Dementyevna? Couldn't I go home and tell your husband that you want to think things over, and will give your answer in the evening? That'd be more sensible. But to talk this way, deciding on the spur of the moment——. It's easy to make a mistake when you're angry. I want to save you regrets and tears."

"No, Marya Semyonovna. Don't try to persuade me. It'll be as I've said. I'm never coming back. It's all over."

Her lips trembled as she spoke, and big tears rolled slowly down her hollow cheeks.

"Well, it's your own business. I've said enough. You have to do the deciding!" And Marya Semyonovna went.

Again Vasya wanted to moan like a wounded animal, to sob loudly so that she could be heard throughout the house and on the street; for it was all over. There was no going back. Farewell, Volodya. Farewell.

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Vasya wept inconsolably, until finally she fell asleep,

buried in Lisa's pillow. For she had not closed her eyes all night.

She was awakened by the sound of an auto chugging away under her window.

Whose car? She jumped to her feet. Was Vladimir coming for her? Hope and joy awoke in her heart. She pushed the window open—Vassya, the boy, was standing at the door.

"Vassilissa Dementyevna, something terrible has happened. Vladimir Ivanovitch has taken poison."

"How? What?" Vasya flew over to the boy, seized his hand. "Is he dead?"

"No, not yet. He's still alive. But he's writhing; he's in agony. He's calling for you. Ivan Ivanovitch sent me in the car."

Hatless, barely dressed, Vasya entered the auto. Her teeth were chattering, she was trembling as from a fever.

She had killed him! Had hurt him mortally! She had refused her pity and her help. And he had begged for her in the morning—how he had begged for her!

She stared before her with wide-open eyes. They expressed not sorrow, but death, the inevitable.

Vassya didn't see her eyes. He was telling, with an important air, just what had occurred. He liked the idea of such interesting things happening.

Vladimir Ivanovitch had gone to the office in the morning; then, after half an hour, he had come home.

He had gone into the study, and Vassya had seen him going to the closet where he kept samples of dyes that were being tested for their stability. Then Vassya was busy sweeping in the courtyard. When he had finished and returned to the house, he heard someone groaning in the study. He went in to see what was wrong. There was Vladimir Ivanovitch lying on the sofa, only the whites of his eyes showing, his mouth open and foaming. And then the fun began . . .

Vassya had run for the doctor, who lived around the corner. He was just eating. But Vassya told him how matters stood: "The man's dying, you can eat later." Vassya had to make two hurried trips to the druggist in the car. Ivan Ivanovitch came over. The whole house was turned upside down.

Vasya listened without hearing a word. She herself was more dead than alive. Nothing remained but Vladimir and his sufferings. They filled her mind completely. If Volodya should die her life would be at an end, too. There would be only emptiness, an emptiness more dreadful than the grave.

She entered the house with the boy. Ivan Ivanovitch was just taking the doctor to the door.

"Is he alive?"

"We're doing everything possible. We won't be able to know anything definite before the morning."

She tiptoed into the bedroom. Vladimir's groans became more and more distinct. She seemed to be

moaning herself. Could Vladimir be detached from her, from Vasya? The bedroom was changed, different. The rug was rolled up, the bed had been moved. But the bed was empty. Where was Volodya? Something big, white, long lay on the divan. Its face was a bluish gray, its eyes were closed. The moaning stopped.

What was that? Was he dead?

"Volodya! Volodya!"

The physician turned on her furiously.

"Silence! No hysterics!"

Assisted by a white-capped nurse, the doctor was busy with Vladimir. Both looked grave and severe; they did not let Vasya come near Vladimir.

He opened his eyes and breathed more rapidly; he was alive!

"Doctor," Vasya whispered pleadingly, "tell me the truth. Is there any hope?"

"There's always hope as long as the heart is beating," the doctor answered angrily, as if she were asking silly questions.

What did that mean? "As long as the heart is beating?" And suppose it should stop?

But she asked nothing more. The doctor was busy; he and the nurse were raising Vladimir's head, pouring something into his mouth.

Once more Vladimir began to moan. Short, plaintive cries. Vasya listened. She no longer felt any-

thing, but was absolutely numb, as if grief had paralyzed her senses, as if her being had stopped.

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Twilight, and darkness. The night-lamp burning in the bed-room. Other physicians came, consulted. The errand-boy was rushed to the Health Bureau for special medicine.

Vasya was not permitted to see Vladimir; nor did he ask for her. He seemed unconscious, occasionally uttered short, sobbing moans. She thought that as he moaned his spirit was leaving him, that his soul was struggling against his body; but the body refused to liberate the soul.

Helplessly superfluous, Vasya walked among the physicians, knowing of nothing she could do.

Suddenly it struck her like a thunderbolt: there must be rumors afloat in the city. People would say: A Communist—and a suicide! Why? And the gossiping would begin. She would have to hurry, hurry, to forestall gossip. She would have to think of something. What happened and why? An inspiration: mushrooms! He had had mushrooms for breakfast, and now he was near death. She remembered such a case in her grandmother's village while she had visited there. A tailor, who had come from the city to visit his brother, had gathered some mushrooms himself, had cooked them, eaten them, and died.

Vasya began to telephone. Michailo Pavlovitch came first. She would tell him the details when she saw him; now she merely wanted to tell him of the tragedy. Briefly, it was this: Vladimir Ivanovitch had been poisoned by mushrooms, and lay on the point of death. Then she telephoned the Chairman, and other Comrades.

She had prompted Ivan Ivanovitch, who was explaining matters to the members of the administration, advising the office. And very minutely she told Vassya, the errand-boy, and Marya Semyonovna what they would have to say. Vassya, keen and quick-witted, curled his lip, shrugged his shoulders, and said nothing. Let it be so! It was all the same to him. Marya Semyonovna, however, was offended, pressed her lips together and folded her hands over her apron. She refused to agree to the mushroom story.

"How can a man be poisoned so badly by mushrooms? Everybody'll say: 'Why wasn't the cook more careful?' "

But Vasya insisted. The story had been told to everybody: he had eaten mushrooms, and they had made him ill.

"Have it your own way! But it wasn't a very clever idea. If it had been something else—but mushrooms! Who would cook bad mushrooms?"

Vasya left the kitchen. Marya Semyonovna, however, couldn't regain her composure, banged about furiously with the pots. "Here they make a mess of

things, get everything all mixed up, and now I'm to blame. First they make a bed the devil himself couldn't sleep in, and now I have to lie in it, if you please! Marya Semyonovna is responsible! I can't tell the difference between good and bad mushrooms! How can they insult a person like that? I've been in the kitchen for twenty years—there's no other cook like me; I'm as good as a chef! You should see my pile of references. Even the late Madame Gollolobova, the general's wife, who always was so proud, never called me anything but Marya Semyonovna; and the Pokatilovs, the millionaires, gave me a gold watch and chain for Christmas because my sauces were so good. And now just look at what they've thought up! 'Marya Semyonovna gave the manager poisonous mushrooms!' I didn't think such an outrage was possible. Didn't I do everything I could? I felt sorry for this Vassilissa, never breathed a word to her about her husband's sweetheart. But that's how people are! Nothing but injustice! And they're Communists . . .!"

"Why are you angry, Marya Semyonovna? Why do you feel offended?" Vassya spoke thoughtfully, eating his soup the while with great relish.

"Does it make any difference what they tell us to say? The truth will out. You won't be held responsible; they've invented the story about the mushrooms only to keep down the scandal. But I like it. It's an interesting business! There's passion for you! What are the movies compared to this?"

"And you're having a good time, you silly boy! A person's dying, and you think it's fun! What has the world come to! Nobody cares about life. The least little thing happens, and—bing, bang—they've shot the fellow. That's why people don't really want to live any more. It's all because they've forgotten God!"

"Oh, forget about God yourself! I'm not a Communist, but I don't believe in God, either."

"And it's wrong of you not to believe. There he sits and chatters without doing any work. Why don't you help me clear away the plates? These fellows, these doctors use up so many dishes. They're forever wanting tea and everything else. God's will be done. That's what I told that dressed-up minx, the maid of Vladimir Ivanovitch's sweetheart. I was just finished with serving supper for the doctors when she comes running in by the back door, rustling her skirts, wearing a little batiste apron, sporting a butterfly on her head, and wagging her tail. 'My lady sent me to find out how Vladimir Ivanovitch is getting on.' 'He's getting on so well,' I said, 'that I guess he'll be standing before his God pretty soon, for God punishes everyone for his sins. But as for your mistress, that hussy, just tell her she'd better go to church and do penance. After all, she's the only one who's to blame.' "

In Vassilissa's presence, Marya Semyonovna was very silent. But the moment she found someone else to talk to there was no stopping the torrent of her words.

* * * * *

The house grew still. People had come during the day: members of the administration, fellow workers; the physicians had been consulting. Lisa shared the night-watch with Vasya, so that she would not be alone as she suffered and waited for the end. Lisa felt that she, too, was partly responsible; for she had aroused Vasya against Vladimir.

"Don't say that, Lisa. I worked myself up against him. It took mortal danger to make me realize that nothing in the world is dearer to me than he. How can I live without him? His blood will be on my head."

Her curly head supported on her hand, Vasya sat beside Vladimir's bed, thinking. Suppose Volodya should die, so that she could no longer live with him—what then? The Revolution? The Party? The Party could use only those who had no crime on their conscience. But Vasya would never be able to forget that she had killed Vladimir. If there had been some good reason. . . . But because of a woman's jealousy. If he had had crooked dealings with thieves like Savelyev, if he had acted against the interests of the people, there would have been a reason. But to make her friend die because of a woman! And such a friend! She had thought he did not love her. But he must have loved her, since he had gone to his death. So life without her meant nothing to him? In spite of her sorrow this realization moved her to tears, to sweet, penitent tears. Gazing at her beloved man, Vasya whispered tenderly: "Will you forgive me, my

darling? Will you be able to forget, my dear friend?"

He stirred, moved his head restlessly.

"Water . . . Water. . . ."

Gently Vasya raised his head from the pillow, as the nurse had shown her, and gave him water.

Vladimir drank. His eyes opened and looked at her, but seemed not to see her:

"Do you feel better, Volodetchka?"

She bent over him anxiously.

He didn't answer. He opened his eyes and closed them again.

"Is Ivan Ivanovitch here?" he asked feebly.

"No, he's gone. Do you want him?"

He nodded. "Call him—phone him."

"But the doctor forbade you to bother about business."

Vladimir looked impatient and fretful.

"Please don't torment me, now at least. Get him." His eyes closed.

Vasya felt a dagger. Why had he said that? "Please don't torment me, now at least!" So he had not forgiven her for causing him this mortal agony.

She summoned Ivan Ivanovitch.

When he came, Vladimir asked Vasya to leave him alone with Ivan Ivanovitch. She went into the garden.

The red roses had withered away, but the dahlias were in full bloom. The sun was blazing down on her hands, her shoulders, her head. It no longer caressed her as in the spring, but burned painfully. The garden

was neglected, the honeysuckle vines entwined the lilac bushes like ivy. The sky was not blue—the heat made it look like molten silver.

Vasya walked over the baking ground.

No. Vladimir wouldn't forgive her! He would not forget. If she had come when he called her that morning, nothing would have happened. Now she had lost him—lost him forever. Not her adored lover, but her friend, her comrade. Volodya would not trust her any more, would not lean on her again. Vasya was standing beside the acacia tree that had been so full of white blossoms in the spring. She closed her eyes. Why hadn't she poisoned herself? Why did she still live?

"Vassilissa Dementyevna, Vladimir Ivanovitch wants you," Ivan Ivanovitch called to her as he entered the car and went away.

Where was he going? Was he taking a message to Vladimir's friend? But Vasya no longer cared.

The past would never return.

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It was hot. The scorching sun of summer was exhausting. The shades had been lowered. Vladimir was sleeping; Vasya knelt at the foot of his bed, driving away the flies.

He had to sleep, to regain his strength. He had suffered enough.

Vasya and Volodya were alone in the house; Marya

Semyonovna had gone shopping. Vassya, the boy, had been sent away.

Vasya liked being alone with Volodya. She felt as if he belonged to her, as if he were her property. He was so weak and helpless.

If only he could understand, if only he could read her heart. He would see how ardently she loved him, how she was suffering, how she longed for his caresses, how her loneliness starved her. Why was Volodya always so taciturn, so hostile toward her? He never looked into her eyes. When she did not arrange the pillows quite properly he would say irritably: "And that calls itself a nurse! She doesn't even know how to fix the pillows."

Of course, one can't expect much from a sick man; still—why was he like that? Could he really not forgive her? Never? And if they stayed together would it always be as now, lonely, dismal, bleak?

She looked at Vladimir, at the dear, familiar face with its long eye-lashes. Vasya had fallen in love with them at the very beginning. And he had been captivated by her hair. But her hair was gone. . . .

It was like the old fairy-tale. Her hair had bewitched him; when it was cut off her lover left her. How they had loved each other then, in '17. And later, when the White offensive began. The night when, together, they arrested the conspirators. "If I fall, Vasya, don't lose a single hour of your work; your tears can wait till later." "And the same goes for you, Volodya. We promise each other." They

had held each other's hands, had looked into each other's eyes, and had gone to their work, without delay. It had been cold then, the stars had been shining, the snow had creaked under their feet as Vasya and Vladimir had gone with their men.

At the memory Vasya's heart grew tender; as if the warmth radiating from her lost happiness were melting it. Vasya had not wept when the disaster had come upon her; she had not lamented, had forgotten herself. But now the tears were running down her cheeks. Not bitter, scalding tears, but gently sorrowful ones. She was weeping for the happiness of long ago.

"Vasya—why—Vasya!—what is it?"

Volodya had raised his head from the pillows, and was looking at her. His eyes were distant no longer, no longer seemed to look past her. They weren't cold. They were "his" eyes, Volodya's loving, sympathetic eyes, although their expression still was sad.

"What is it, Vasyuk? Why are you crying, poor child?"

He laid his hand on her curls lovingly.

"Volodya, my darling. Will you forgive me? Will you forgive?"

"Silly Vasya. What do you want me to forgive? Now, stop crying, so we can talk. Sit down here, closer to me. Here we live our lives side by side, saying nothing and suffering so."

"But you must not get excited now—I'm afraid for you, dear. Some other time."

"No, it wouldn't go so well some other time. Let me talk, Vasya. I'm so wretched. That's why I wanted to die. And even now, though I want to live, I see no way out. . . ."

"We'll look for it together, Volodya. After all, I'm not a stranger to you."

"Are you sure you know everything, Vasya?"

She nodded. "I know."

"Now you understand what was hurting me? And you were always reproaching me with silly things, forever harping on Savelyev."

"I know, Volodya."

"And you made another mistake. Did you think that was love? Did you? No, Vasya, I love only you, you, my guardian angel, you, my faithful friend. But there, Vasya, it's different, entirely different. Call it whatever you want, call it lack of self-control, whatever you want, only not love! But you were jealous of me, you suspected me, spied on me."

"Never, Volodya. Never."

"How can you say that? Think of the blue silk! Think of your cross-examinations: 'Why do you smell of perfume?' And 'Where does Savelyev live? Show me!'"

"I didn't spy on you, Volodya; no, I didn't. But I was imagining all sorts of dreadful things. I wanted to drive away those fancies, Volodya. I wanted to believe in you, to keep my faith in you."

"Oh, don't talk about your fancies! You were jealous all the same. You didn't say so openly, but you tormented me, tortured me. Why go over all that? We're both to blame!"

Silence. Both were thinking.

"Is our life to go on like this, Volodya?" Vasya asked mournfully.

"I don't know, Vasya. I'm lost myself. I don't know what to do."

Again both were silent. Both had much to say; but they could not reach each other.

"Might you not really be happier with the other girl, Volodya?" Vasya asked cautiously. She was surprised that the question did not hurt her.

"Vasya, Vasya! I see that you don't trust me. Can't you see whom I love? Didn't I try to kill myself because I had lost you?" There was reproach in both his voice and his eyes.

Her heart was trembling with joy.

"Volodya!"

They embraced; their lips sought each other.

"No, not like that, Vasya! Calm down, Vasyuk! My strength hasn't come back yet, you see—I can't even kiss you. . . ."

Smiling, Vladimir patted Vasya's head; but his eyes were sad again. No; the wall between them could not be broken down. They could not find the path that led through the thorny hedge of misunderstanding from one heart to the other.

CHAPTER XI

Vladimir had returned to his work for the first time, had gone to the office. Vasya was rejoicing in her freedom. In the morning she rushed to the Party Committee, and thence to the hemp-binding works. Lisa was asking for help, preparations had to be made for the meeting of the union.

On the way to the Party Committee Vasya smiled. She felt as though she had escaped from a cage. Everything delighted her. She felt as if she had not seen her Comrades for an incredibly long time; and they were glad, too. They had missed her. Vasya was a general favorite. She did so much, gossiped not at all, and sympathized with everybody's troubles. The moment she reached Party headquarters she was given work to do—she had to determine what was to be discussed at the meeting, and to classify the material with the speakers.

Vasya looked at the clock. Impossible! It was almost eight! Vladimir must have waited for her impatiently. Had they given him a dinner conforming with the doctor's orders? Vasya had forgotten all about it.

She walked with Lisa, discussing the news that a Comrade of the Central Administration had brought from Moscow. Many peculiar things were happening in the Party these days. Lisa was in complete disagreement with the new policy; she stood with the boys of the factory. They were going to put up their own candidates at the Party Conference—there would be another fight against the Chairman.

Vasya envied her. Since her arrival she had taken no really active part in anything, as if she were not a member of the Party, but only a "sympathizer."

"That's because you're a manager's wife. If you had been living by yourself you would have come back to work very soon."

Vasya sighed. Lisa didn't have to tell her that; she knew it herself. But she had no time to think of such things. As soon as Vladimir should have completely recovered she would go back to her province.

"Oh, you won't go! You're much too fond of your Vladimir Ivanovitch. You're only a wife nowadays," Lisa objected irritably.

Vasya remained silent. What could she say? Lisa was right; but she did not complain. She had gone through too much. Let Volodya only live, live without suffering.

When Vasya came home he was not there.

"Where is Vladimir Ivanovitch? Hasn't he come back yet?"

"Of course he came back. He was here from three o'clock, and waited for you to come for dinner. But he couldn't wait so long. When you didn't come he ate with Ivan Ivanovitch. They went away not long ago," Marya Semyonovna told her. "But there's a note for you on the table."

Vasya took it up.

"Dear Vasya, we've agreed always to be frank with each other; and you said you'd always understand me. I absolutely must be there today. I'll tell you why later. Then you'll understand that I couldn't help it. I beg you to stand by our agreement, and not to grieve. Your Volodya."

When Vasya had read the note her hands dropped on her lap.

Again? So it was not over. But why had she thought it was over? Had Volodya ever said so? Hadn't she known that Ivan Ivanovitch was always going back and forth, forming the connecting link between Vladimir and the other woman? Volodya was honest, as she had begged him to be. Frankness, only frankness! Why did it hurt so? Why did bitter resentment and indignation rise in her heart, as if Volodya had deceived her again?

Marya Semyonovna was setting the table and looking disapprovingly at Vasya.

"Do you want to eat?" she asked. "Are you starting this business all over again? Nobody eats, and a person is expected to cook! Then there'll be more

of your endless quarrels and tears. You may resent it or not, Vassilissa Dementyevna, but I must tell you the truth; you're not the woman for Vladimir Ivanovitch. Now you're broken-hearted over his letter, and you're crying because he's gone to his mistress. But I tell you that you're to blame, too. The man just rose up from the dead, so to speak. He took poison on account of you. But the moment he walked out the door you were gone yourself. If it were your work, it would be different. Business demands its rights. But you just run around from one meeting to another, enlightening our silly women. Why don't you clean up your own house before you try to teach others? It's a disgrace to work for you!"

Banging the door, she disappeared into the kitchen. But after a few minutes Marya Semyonovna returned, a little gentler, with a hot omelet and a cup of cocoa.

"Eat, Vassilissa Dementyevna, and stop thinking. You can't think of everything, after all."

Marya Semyonovna sat down at the table beside Vasya and recounted her own experiences. Something of the sort had happened in the house of the late Madame Gollolobova, the general's wife. All on account of the French governess. But then the general and his wife were reconciled and lived together very well until she died. What was more, they even were happy.

Vasya listened half-heartedly, but did not interrupt. She had come to know Marya Semyonovna during

Vladimir's illness. Marya Semyonovna pitied Vasya, and recognized one of her own people in her. She hated the specialists, the doctors, and the managers, thought them all *burshuis*. But now Vasya had to listen to Marya Semyonovna's endless stories of how the millionaire Pokatilovs had lived; and what the general's wife used to like for dinner. They bored Vasya; but she didn't want to hurt Marya Semyonovna's feelings. She was a kindly old soul, though she seemed rather sulky at first glance.

Her stories were particularly disagreeable to Vasya just now. She wanted to weigh everything, to clear up matters in her own mind, to think things over from beginning to end.

"Thanks for the supper, Marya Semyonovna. Now I'll have to go to my papers."

"Is that all you ate? If I'd known that I wouldn't have cooked anything for you. You'll kill yourself, Vassilissa Dementyevna; and the whole business isn't worth that. For, to tell you the truth, I wouldn't give a kopek for Vladimir Ivanovitch's sweetheart! She isn't worth your little finger."

Lisa had said the same thing.

"Why do you say that, Marya Semyonovna? She is supposed to be so very beautiful."

"What's beautiful in her? She's painted and powdered like a clown. She isn't interested in anything but clothes, so that she can get more and more out of the men."

"Do you know her? Did you ever see her?"

"Of course I know her. How often didn't she sleep here before you came, the dressed-up hussy! She has all sorts of notions. She has to have hot water at night, needs this, that, and the other. She pretends she's a lady, and says she's been used to this life since she was a child. But she's lying—she doesn't look like that. Real gentlefolk are more polite. They always say 'Please' and 'Thank you' to the servants. But this hussy can only give orders: 'Bring me this! Do that! Clear these things away!'"

"What's her name?"

"Her name? Nina Constantinovna. I can't remember her last name. Everybody in town calls her just Nina Constantinovna."

"I'd like to see her sometime," Vasya said thoughtfully, turning Volodya's note in her hands.

"Nothing could be simpler. She goes walking in the City Park every day when the band plays. Let's go there tomorrow, and you can take a look at the minx. In the old days that kind used to walk the streets of Moscow at night."

"When the music plays, you say? All right, Marya Semyonovna; let's go there. Maybe I'll feel better after I've seen her."

Marya Semyonovna shook her head doubtfully; but she made no attempt to dissuade Vasya. She was anxious to see how the two rivals would look at each other.

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Vasya went through the dark house. She didn't want any light; she felt that the darkness soothed her. She could not sleep.

In the morning everything seemed fine; Volodya was well and working again, and she, too, was busy. For she would soon return to her province. She didn't want to be the "manager's lady". Since she and Vladimir had agreed always to be frank, she felt better. But the pain was still there. It was not jealousy. Nor had Vladimir broken his word; he had told the truth to Vasya as to a friend. Still, she did not feel quite happy.

She scolded herself: what in the world did she want? Surely she had not thought that Vladimir had come back to her altogether, that he had torn the other out of his heart. But that was just it. That was what Vasya had thought, hoped for, longed for.

And what was the upshot of it all? They had suffered so much, and had progressed not an inch. Vladimir was again spending his evenings with the other woman while Vasya wandered alone through the dark house. He had no pity for her. Whom did he love? Her, Vasya, his friend and comrade, or the other? He said he loved Vasya; but it wasn't true. These thoughts only increased her suffering. If she knew that he had stopped loving her she would go away. But as matters stood, how could she go? Suppose she was mistaken. Suppose he should attempt suicide again. Vasya could not leave Vladimir. How

could she live far away from him with this agony in her heart? It was more bearable when he was there.

Come what might, she loved Vladimir. If she didn't love him could she suffer such torment because of him?

She loved him: but she understood him less every day. As if they had entered a forest by two divergent paths. The farther they penetrated into the forest the greater the distance between them. She loved Volodya; but in her heart she condemned him more and more. Why had he had anything to do with such a creature? If it had been one of her own people, a Communist girl, she would not have felt so hurt. But this was a real *burshuika.* Volodya himself had told Vasya that she was a stranger, a young lady of the aristocracy. Spoiled. She could not understand the Bolsheviki and the Communists, but longed for her old life. She had been brought up in luxury. There had been seventeen servants in her home. She had had a horse of her own, accustomed to the side-saddle. Her father had been a White soldier. Her mother had died during the Revolution. Her brother, an officer, had been reported missing. Only she was left. She had looked for work. As she knew many languages she was taken on in the administrative offices as a secretary. Volodya met her there; she fell in love with him, wrote him letters.

Vasya was far away, Volodya was always alone,

So their affair began. It was soon noticed in the office; Nina Constantinovna was frowned upon, and had to give up her position. Savelyev made her his secretary.

"Only his secretary?" Vasya couldn't hold back the question. For one thing, she wanted to irritate Vladimir; besides, she wanted to learn the truth about the other.

"What sort of gossip are your repeating there?" Vladimir flared up. "Aren't you ashamed to say such vile things? I didn't think you would sling mud at her, like any other woman. Why, Vasya? It doesn't become you!"

He told Vasya that Savelyev was a sort of father, or guardian, to Nina Constantinovna. He had known her parents; and when Nina stood alone in the world he took care of her, gave her advice and material assistance, procured the position in the administrative office for her. Then, when she left, he helped her again. She had to vacate her room. Where could she go? To Vladimir? That couldn't be done. Savelyev offered to take her into his house. But Nina Constantinovna didn't want that. Was she to be left on the street? Savelyev found a small house where he arranged to have his office, and offered Nina a home there. "For he is something like a guardian of hers. He feels sorry for her, takes care of her. . . ."

"And makes love to her!" Again Vasya could not control herself. She was angry; Volodya spoke too

favorably of her. He always had been a trusting soul. Vasya, however, was suspicious of the girl. Everybody said she was a regular one. . . .

"It's a lie, a slanderous lie! Why do you find pleasure in repeating such filth? If you want to know the truth, ask me. Nina thinks of no one. Nina loves only me. And even if it were true, Savelyev would not be the only one to make love to her. Do you know Maklezov, of the Foreign Trade Office? He offered her a life of luxury, but Nina showed him the door. I won't deny that Savelyev may like Nina. Maybe his love for her isn't purely paternal. But Nina can't stand him—as a man, that is. There's nothing doing there. It's not to be thought of. I know Nina, you can be sure of that."

She saw that he was growing quite excited, as if he wanted to convince not Vasya, but himself. But what hurt her most was Savelyev's connection with everything. She had disliked him from the first day. There had been a reason for the S. C. telling her that Vladimir Ivanovitch ought to keep away from him.

"But I don't see why Savelyev has to be mixed up with it. That's why they say that you keep her together, share and share alike."

"If anyone dares say that to you, spit in his face! You must understand me, Vasya. That's the terrible part of it, that Nina was a virgin when I took her. She was pure. . . ."

"Pure?"

Vasya felt a stab in her heart, as if a fine needle were piercing it. Long ago, in '17, at that evening tea in Vasya's room, he had said:

"I'm keeping my heart for a pure girl." And then, that first night, he had caressed her and said: "No one in the world can be purer than you."

"Pure? What nonsense are you talking there, Vladimir? What has the body to do with purity? You're beginning to think like a *burshui!*"

"Try to understand me, Vasya. I don't think so, but she does. It's a great tragedy for her that I took her without marrying her. Now, she thinks, she's 'lost.' You can't know what she suffers. She cries all the time. Try to understand, Vasya. She thinks differently than we proletarians do. The first man who has her has to marry her, too."

"Why didn't you tell me that before? Who's preventing you from marrying her? I?"

"Oh, Vasya, Vasya. You're so clever—but when it comes to love you're a woman, like all the rest. How can I marry her, Vasya? We're strangers—we're different in every respect. It's not love. It's rather pity. You can see it yourself."

Only pity? Really? She wanted to believe it was only pity.

"If you don't love or understand each other, why don't you separate? It's tormenting both of you!" Vasya didn't mention herself.

"How can I leave her? It's not such a simple matter, Vasya. Where can she go if I leave her? On the street? Should Savelyev keep her? Or should she register as a prostitute?"

"Why all this fuss? Let her look for work!"

"Work! That's more easily said than done nowadays, when everybody's laying off. Besides, what sort of work? After all, Nina can't go into a factory!"

Vasya wanted to say: Why not into a factory? Why not, that hussy? But she wanted to spare Vladimir. He was not yet well, and the doctor had ordered him to avoid all excitement. He was already visibly affected by their conversation.

Later, as she roamed through the dark house, Vasya was sorry. Why hadn't she cried out the truth? Why hadn't she told Vladimir everything she thought of the woman? She didn't believe that Nina Constantinovna loved him. She was merely ensnaring him, to gain a double advantage. Vasya hated her, not because she was reputed to be of loose character, but because her heart was not pure. Plenty of prostitutes were better than the so-called decent women. Vasya remembered the curly-haired Sinka, who had been shot by the Whites, and who cried, as she died: "Long live the Soviet Government! Long live the Revolution!" She had been on the streets, the lowest of the low; but when the Revolution broke out she revealed herself, undertook the most difficult and most dangerous tasks. She had worked in the Cheka with all her heart and

soul. Vasya could have understood Vladimir's falling in love with a woman like that. But this "lady," this *burshuika!* She was a stranger, after all. And she had no heart, she was simply fooling Vladimir. He, trusting soul, believed in her. That was what hurt so badly. Vasya would never be able to reconcile herself to that.

What was her hold on him? His pity for her? I'm so weak, so helpless! He said she had been pure! Pure! But now there remained not the tiniest trace of that purity. She had exchanged it long ago for presents from men. He, however, still believed in her, Vasya was furious at the other woman.

"How long are you going to run around the house this way, Vassilissa Dementyevna?" grumbled Marya Semyonovna, breaking Vasya's train of thought. "You ought to take care of yourself; you need your strength for your meetings. Why don't you try to sleep? There's no sense in your staying up for your husband. You won't want to have him in your room anyway, when he comes from the other one. I'll make his bed in the drawing-room."

Vasya threw her arms about Marya Semyonovna. But she felt even more sad. A stranger was sorry for her. But he, her lover, her husband, her friend, pitied only the other, the heartless, wily woman who wound herself about him like a serpent.

* * * * *

"Are you asleep, Vasyuk?" Coming into the bedroom, Vladimir lit the lamp. Vasya lay in bed, her eyes wide open. How could she sleep with this agony in her heart?

"No, I'm not asleep."

"Is Vasyuk angry with me?"

He sat down on the bed and tried to kiss Vasya. She pushed him away vehemently.

"So you are angry with me. What about our agreement? I told you the truth as I would a friend. You asked me to, yourself. And now. . . ? Is it better to lie?"

Vasya did not answer.

"It's not good for us, darling, to begin our squabbles and reproaches all over again. Why are you angry? Because I visited Nina? Just think it over, Vasya. I was together with you all the time; and she is alone. Do you think she didn't worry and suffer enough when I was ill?"

Vasya wanted to scream: "What has that to do with me?" But she pressed her lips together. She said nothing; only her heart was beating furiously.

"You must not think that anything happened, Vasyuk. I wasn't alone with her. Savelyev was there, too, and Ivan Ivanovitch came in. We had something to discuss. Would you like to know why I was there today? Well, Vasya—I went there to say good-bye. Why do you stare so? Don't you believe me? Ask Ivan Ivanovitch. That's why I had him come here, so

that he would arrange everything. Help Nina Constantinova to get away from here, pay her rent, and all the rest of it."

"Where is she going?" Vasya's voice sounded hollow.

"To Moscow. Savelyev will take her there; he has relatives there, with whom Nina will live. And she will look for a position. It'll be easier for all of us that way."

Vasya remained silent. There was suspicion in her eyes.

Why the sudden change? What had happened? Didn't he love her any more?

"Let's not talk about love. That's quite another question. But Nina, too, understands that things can't go on this way. She's fully made up her mind to go to Moscow; she decided that long ago. She told me she would go the morning you went away from me. She telephoned me, and said she would not go on with this life. Either the one thing or the other. Or she would go to Moscow. . . ."

"Ah, so that's it. That's why you took poison! One woman had gone, and the other was threatening to leave if you didn't marry her. Now I see it all. You were afraid you'd lose her! What a fool I am. What a silly fool. I thought it was because of me that you were despondent and wanted to die." Vasya laughed bitterly, hysterically.

"How you twist everything, Vasya. How spiteful

you've become. You're not the Vasyuk you used to be," Vladimir said sadly, getting up from the bed. "There's really no sense in our talking. I wanted to tell you everything, so there would be no secrets between us. But now I see that the more truthful I am the worse matters become. You've become different, cruel."

"Oh, no! Stop, Volodya!" Vasya's voice was like breaking glass, quivered with all the despair of her heart. "If we're going to talk things over, let's do it. Why do you send her to Moscow? You love her, not me. If you loved me you would have stayed with me today. But you consider only her, you pity only her."

"Vasya, Vasya. How unjust you are. If you only knew what Nina has gone through in these months. She is so young—almost a child. She hasn't a single close friend. Everybody slings mud at her. And why, Vasya? Because she had the misfortune of falling in love with me. You, Vasya, have your Party, your friends. But she has only me. I'm her only protector, her only supporter."

Walking up and down the room, his hand on his back, Vladimir told Vasya that Nina had expected a child. His child—his dream! So much joy, and so much sorrow.

"Where is the child?" Vasya asked, trembling.

"You surely don't think Nina could have kept it! The scandal! And how you would have suffered! We

thought of you. Nina cried her heart out. But for your sake, Vasya, we decided to do even that."

For her sake? He had discussed it with a strange woman, had "thought of her" with a strange woman, of her, Vasya, as if she were not his friend and comrade, but some enemy. He had not come to her with his troubles, but to the other, to Nina. So she was nearer to him—she, not Vasya, belonged with him now.

"The day you came I found out that Nina was pregnant. Now you know what was tormenting me, Vasya."

She nodded silently.

Vladimir went on, telling her that Nina had gone to another city, to prevent gossip. Savelyev had found a place for her to live there. And she had had her abortion there. But the operation had not gone off smoothly. There had been complications. Vladimir had gone to see her.

"Was that when the shipping clerks were going to strike?"

"Yes, about that time."

Hm. . . . So that was why he had wept in the dining room that day. On account of Nina. Not because of the shipping clerks, of course.

"And she came back the morning Savelyev arrived, didn't she?" Vasya went on.

"Yes."

"I understand."

Neither spoke; both waited. Now the hard, cruel words would come again. Later they would regret them; but they could not be taken back. They distorted love, mutilating it until it was like a pock-marked face. No more beauty, no more heart-warming happiness.

"Vasya!" Vladimir broke the oppressive silence. "Why all this heartache? Who's to blame? I swear to you, I spared you, spared you as long as I could."

"That wasn't necessary, Volodya. I only wanted you to believe that I'm your friend."

Sitting down again beside her, Vladimir took her hand.

"Yes, Vasya, I know you're my friend. That's why it's so hard for me." He laid his head on Vasya's shoulder, as he had always used to do. Stroking that head, Vasya felt a sweet joy tempering her pain. In spite of everything he was there, with her! He still loved her, in his way.

"Mightn't it be better, Volodya, if I go away, and she stays?" she asked cautiously.

"Don't start with that again, Vasya. Don't torture me. Instead of helping me you drive me off the right path. I've revealed my soul to you as to a friend. I'm keeping no secrets from you. And here you say you want to go away."

"For your sake, Volodya; if you love her."

"What do you mean by love, Vasya? Love must be returned; and I feel it so clearly, that Nina and I

have nothing in common, that she isn't a comrade, that she can never be a friend like you to me. I'm sorry for her, I take care of her. What would become of her if I were to leave her, if we were to part? I feel responsible for her. Can't you understand? After all, she was a virgin when I took her."

"That's nonsense, Volodya. Why are you responsible for her? She wasn't a child; she must have known what she was doing. Besides, who bothers about such things nowadays?"

"You have proletarian ideas; but Nina is different. It's a real tragedy for her."

"I know. That's why I say I'll go away, and you should marry her."

"There you go again, Vasya! Didn't I beg you not to torment me? Besides it's too late. Everything's been decided. Nina Constantinovna goes to Moscow Thursday. That's all there's to it! Let's stop talking about it."

Vladimir spoke so calmly, with so much assurance, that she had to believe him.

"But you be patient, Vasya, for another few days. Don't do anything rash. She'll go away, and we'll live as before. No, it'll be better than ever before. Now we have suffered together, and that'll bring us closer to each other."

Volodya put his arms around Vasya, and kissed her eyes.

"I'd like to sleep with you tonight, Vasyuk. Do you mind? I'm so tired, my head's reeling."

Lying down, he laid his head on Vasya's shoulder, and fell asleep at once.

Vasya, however, did not sleep. If he loved her, he would have caressed her. If he loved her, he would have understood her grief. She gazed at him. That familiar head, hiding such strange, incomprehensible thoughts. Those long lashes, veiling tender glances not meant for her. Those warm lips, covering another woman with yearning kisses, arousing her passion.

She pushed Voldya's head from her shoulder. He was a stranger to her!

"Why do you drive your precious Volya away?" Vladimir whispered in his sleep.

"Your precious Volya?" Whose pet name was that? Not Vasya's. He had confused them. He thought of the other even in his sleep.

Vasya scowled at her sleeping husband. Was that her lover? Had he once been her friend and comrade? Was he the man whom she had loved when, together, they had fought for the Soviet?

He was a stranger. A stranger.

She shivered. She was so lonely.

CHAPTER XII

The Park. Dusty, withered by the oppressive heat of the summer. The long and anxiously awaited rain did not come; it would have washed the dust of the city from the trees, would have quenched the thirst of the grass.

The band was playing before a small audience. Children were running about; a few Red Guards were there, sitting in groups, or walking along with their sweethearts. On a shady bench sat a priest in a monk's gown, leaning on his staff, lost in thought. Beside him was a nursemaid, watching a little child.

Vasya and Marya Semyonovna sat down on the bench; although they were a trifle to one side they could see everything.

They waited for Nina Constantinovna.

"Why hasn't our little lady come yet? Generally she's here the moment the music begins, to show off her clothes. All the fine ladies come here to see what's stylish this year. They find out from Nina Constantinovna, because she's always dressed up to the minute."

Vasya listened absent-mindedly. She was eager to see Nina. How would she be? At the same time she was afraid. How could she bear to look at her?

"Is that she, Marya Semyonovna? On that bench there, to the right of the band? The one in the pink dress?"

"How in the world could you think that? Nina Constantinova isn't like that. You'll see the difference between her and the others right away. She's a real fashionable lady."

They sat there, waiting. But Nina did not come. Only when they were about to go home, intending to return the next day, did she appear. She was coming from the other end of the park, and stopped before the band. She was talking to Savelyev and two members of the Red Committee, and seemed unconscious of the eyes that stared at her.

So this was how she looked! She was wearing a thin white dress that enveloped her body in soft folds, and revealed the curve of her breasts. She had on long sand-colored gloves and a hat to match, pulled down over her eyes. Vasya could not distinguish the features, but saw only the lips, shining red as blood.

"What red, red lips!"

"That's the rouge," explained Marya Semyonovna. "You should see her eyes. They look as if she'd smeared soot over them. Somebody ought to take a sponge and wash the dirt off her face. And then

you ought to look at her! I could be beautiful too, if I used powder and rouge."

Nina Constantinovna was leaning on her white parasol, tapping the ground with the point of her white shoes. She laughed, throwing back her head a little. The members of the Red Committee laughed too.

Apparently bored, Savelyev had stepped to one side, and was tracing figures in the sand with his cane.

"Her hat hides her whole face," Vasya complained.

"Come, let's walk past her. Then you can get a better look at the hussy. But I advise you not to look her way. She isn't pretty. When I was working for Madame Gollolobova, that's when I saw real fine ladies and real beauties. Compared to them, she's nothing!"

But Vasya's curiosity bothered her. She had to know why Volodya loved the other girl.

Just as Vasya and Marya Semyonovna were getting up to walk past Nina, she said good-bye to the members of the Red Committee, exclaiming loudly enough for Vasya to hear: "We'll meet again in Moscow." Turning she went on toward the gate, Savelyev following.

"You surely don't want to run after her? You mustn't do that, Vassilissa Dementyevna. You'll have to let her go, that bird. People know you—and that's no way of stopping gossip."

Though she slackened her pace, Vasya kept her eyes fixed on the other.

She was tall, slender; her shoulders swayed a little as she walked. Her head was bowed as she went away from the bandstand. Vasya thought Nina was crying. Savelyev bent toward her, seemed to be trying to persuade her. But Nina shook her head. No, she said, raising her tan-gloved hand to her face, as if to wipe away a tear. Could she weep? Had she come to bid the music farewell? Or—or did she love Volodya? Was she not merely trying to get something from him? Vasya was disturbed. She felt no better now that she had seen Nina Constantinovna. It was no longer jealousy that bothered her, but another, new feeling. Something like pity for Nina. Why had she cried? Why had she come to hear the music? To bid her happiness good-bye?

A new load on Vasya's heart. She was furious at herself. That was all that was needed! To suffer with the other woman, with the one who had got in her way. A fine state of affairs.

* * * * *

Nina had gone to Moscow. Almost two weeks had passed since she and Savelyev had left the city. Logically, Vasya should have enjoyed life now. The interloper was gone. Vladimir had stayed behind with Vasya; so she surely was dearer, more precious to him, and the other affair was merely temporary?

Vasya smiled. Vasya laughed. She coughed less and visited the Party Committee regularly. Vladimir was working, too; he was reorganizing the business according to the plans of the syndicate people. When that would be finished he and Vasya would go to Moscow, whence he was to be transferred to his new district. Vladimir was happy, entirely taken up with his work.

But the real, heart-felt joy of other days was lacking. There was nothing to be done about it. Vladimir was not exactly cool; but he had changed. Frequently he would be moody, would lose his temper.

Why did Vasya come home so late from the Party Committee? It was annoying for their guests, for they would not have dinner without the hostess. Again, he would flare up about the collars: not a single one was clean. Then Vasya, too, would be cross. She wasn't responsible for that; let him take care of it himself. Let him go to Marya Semyonovna. Vasya was no laundress. Both would be furious when they parted—and why? On account of a stupid collar! One day Vasya came home in the rain. To save her hat, she had left it at Party Headquarters, and had put a shawl on her head. When he saw her Vladimir frowned, and snarled: "How you dress! Your shoes are run down at the heels, your skirt is filthy, you come in with a shawl on your head like a peasant woman. Slovenly!"

Again she lost control of herself.

"We can't all strut around like fashion plates. But I don't have to accept any favors from Savelyev."

Vladimir looked daggers at her; he said nothing. Vasya thought he would strike her.

But he restrained himself.

Something was wrong here. Vasya and Vladimir wanted to be friends; but the slightest provocation filled them with hatred for each other. Vladimir was always dreaming of his new position. How he could furnish the house, how he could arrange everything.

This was boring for Vasya. Why furnish a house? What was the pleasure in that? It would be different if it had anything to do with the common good. Vladimir disagreed with her, reproached her with narrow-mindedness.

Vasya told of a dispute in the Marxists' Club on whether history was determined by economic questions alone or by ideas also. She grew animated, wanted Vladimir to hear everything that had been said. But he was bored. All this was empty talk. Increasing the profits of his enterprise—there was something worth doing! And they quarreled again.

When the two of them were alone together they had nothing to talk about. What could they do? They telephoned Ivan Ivanovitch. His presence made them feel more at ease.

Vasya was expecting letters from her province. But none came. Neither Grusha nor Stepan Alexeyevitch wrote a line. What could be the matter?

Although Vasya did not want to admit it even to herself, she suspected, deep down in her heart, that she would be called back to her province to work. Should she go? Should she stay?

* * * * *

A registered letter from home. From Stepan Alexeyevitch. Short, and to the point. He proposed that Vasya take over the group of the textile factories, and organize the work there in a new way, as the Central Administration would prescribe. Vasya would live there, not in the city. He asked for an answer.

Vasya's heart pounded. She longed for her own people. For what was her life here? No work, no joy, only one worry: if only nothing happens! She seemed to be bound hand and foot. She remembered a jackdaw her brother Kolyka had owned. He had caught it in the woods, and had bound its wings so that it couldn't fly away. The bird hopped about on the floor, opened its beak, and turned its bright black eyes toward the window. It tried to flap its wings, but they were bound fast. It tried again, a third time, cawed with distress and—resumed its solemn walk on the floor as if it had never attempted to fly. This was what was happening to Vasya now. Her wings were bound, too, and it was impossible for her to fly. But what was binding her wings? Joy, or love? No; neither of these. She was fettered by

apprehension, by the fear that again something might happen to Vladimir. By her gratitude to him for staying with her, for sending away the 'hussy.' Slender threads. But they were bound tightly about Vasya. She seemed hopelessly entangled in the net.

Lisa said: "I don't understand you, Vassilissa. I tell you, you're becoming a real 'manager's lady.' You can't get away from it."

How could she break these threads, tear the net?

Vasya held Stepan Alexeyevitch's letter in her hand. She felt loath to put it away. It seemed to be a talisman that would help her find her way, as in the fairy-tale.

"Vassilissa Dementyevna, the beer is all gone. You'll have to tell Vladimir Ivanovitch to have some more sent out from the factory. Otherwise we'll get unexpected guests for dinner and we won't know where to get it from. You can't make it out of the air."

Marya Semyonovna looked disapprovingly at Vasya.

"You're always glum, Vassilissa Dementyevna. And why, if I might ask? That dressed-up minx has finally landed in Moscow, thank God, and Vladimir Ivanovitch is with you now, never goes out anywhere. Why do you sulk so? The men don't like that. They want their wives to be jolly, want to hear them laugh, want to have some pleasure at home after the day's work and worries."

As she listened, Vasya smiled and thought: Perhaps she's right. Perhaps I ought to rouse myself and

again become the tomboy Vasya of '18. There was a lot of work in those days, but a lot of laughter, too.

Should she go to see Volodya in the office? An unexpected visitor? Tell him about the letter—and, laughingly, say that she would refuse, that she could not leave her Volodya! He would see how she loved him. He would be glad, would put his arms around her joyfully, would kiss her brown eyes. He would call her Vasya, his tomboy.

She chose a white blouse and put on a blue tie. She stood before the mirror as she put on her hat and arranged her curls. She wanted to please Volodya today. For she was bringing him a gift—a priceless gift! Her refusal of Stepan Alexeyevitch's offer! She would go with Vladimir to his new position, and would undertake some work there.

When she reached the administration building Vasya went to the manager's office. It was empty. The manager was at a conference. But it would soon be over; he would probably be back in about ten minutes.

Vasya waited, looked through the Moscow papers. She had to smile at herself. Now she would make up to Volodya for everything—for his parting from the other, for his greater devotion to herself.

Someone brought in the mail, laid it on the manager's desk. Might there not be some letters for Vasya? She looked over the business envelopes. There—suddenly her heart throbbed wildly, then seemed to

miss a beat. A narrow, tinted envelope—a delicate handwriting, as though engraved. That could only be the other woman: Nina Constantinovna.

Everything was not over? Everything was as before? Lies? Vasya felt as though she were flying, soaring—long, long, endlessly.

She must have lost her balance, for she knocked down the ashtray that stood on the desk.

As she looked at the narrow, tinted envelope, Vasya felt that it contained her destiny. There! It disappeared in her pocket. Now she would learn the truth. Now there would be an end to the lies.

Vladimir entered together with a member of the administration.

"You're here, Vasya? Did you want something, or are you just visiting me?"

"There's no more beer. You'll have to order more from the factory."

"Will you look at that! You're becoming a housewife! I can't recognize my tomboy, Vasya," laughed Vladimir, quite happily.

Laugh. Just you laugh. But I'll tear through the net in which you have caught me. I'll go to the root of this deception.

"What's the trouble, Vasya? Can't you stay longer? Must you go?"

She nodded silently. She was trembling with a fury that might break loose any moment.

She could not wait until she got home to read the

letter. Going to the City Park, she sat down on a bench and impatiently tore open the tinted envelope.

"My precious Volya! My king, my beloved tormenter! Again, not a word from you. The third day without a line. Can you have forgotten me—don't you love your capricious Nina any more? Your little Egyptian monkey? I don't believe it! I don't believe it! But it's terrible, nevertheless. You're with her, and I'm all alone! Your 'mentor' will be able to change you, she'll convince you that our love is a 'sin against Communism', that you must fast Communistically, give up everything that might delight you, and live only for the fanatics. I'm afraid of her. I know the power she has over you. But, my God! I'm not taking anything from her. I want so little. After all, she's recognized as your wife. You're with her always, all the time. And I'm begging only for a few hours for our love. I only beg you to pity me—I have only you, no one else in all this world!

"I wake up at night, trembling: he doesn't love me any more; he's going to leave me. What will become of me then? I'm afraid to think of it. You know that Nikanor Platonovitch is lying in wait for me like a spider. Of course he still plays that fatherly rôle—but we know what he's hoping for. He's waiting anxiously for the day when you'll leave me, when I'll be alone, with no one to protect or help me. That'll be a holiday for him. There are times when I hate him, when I'd rather go on the street than be obliged

to him in any way. Volya! Volya! My beloved, my madly adored lover! Will there never be an end to this? Will you never rescue your Ninyka? Have you no pity for her? Don't you want to protect her?

"I'm crying, Volya. You have no pity for your little monkey. You never think of her, you cruel, faithless man. You're caressing another woman. You love her. I know you love her! And that hurts. Very, very badly.

"I want you, your ardent, insatiable love! Don't you long for my lips? For my embraces? My satiny arms want to enfold you—my breasts yearn for your caresses. . . .

"I can't bear it, Volyda! I can't be away from you any longer. Why did you send me to Moscow? Why?

"But this will have to be our last separation. In your new district you'll have to find a little house for me outside the town. Nobody'll know that I live there. 'The mysterious little house', where you will go at twilight. And there I'll teach you that a love like ours is better and more important than anything else in the world. When are you coming to Moscow? Is she really coming here with you? If only we could have a week together, to make up for this! A week for us only.

"Nikanor Platonovitch says that in the new district you'll have a splendid house for yourself. With a

Gothic dining room. But there's no dining room lamp. I've seen a marvelous chandelier here—a bit expensive, but really artistic. I know you'll like it.

"Now I've told you enough. Such a long letter. You won't be able to hide it. Here I'm joking; but I really want to cry. Can't you feel how I suffer? Why, oh why, doesn't life let us have a little happiness? But don't be alarmed. I won't complain any more. After all I've gone through I've gained a little sense. You do whatever you think is right, and I'll be satisfied with everything. Let me have only one thing—your passionate tenderness, your loving pity for your poor, miserable, capricious Nina.

"Moscow, Ostoshenka 18, Number 7, and not 17 as you wrote last time; the letter almost got lost on account of that.

"I'm yours, from my feet to my lips—only your darling sweetheart.

"Nina."

And, in the margin: "Imagine how delighted I was to find Coty's l'Origan powder in Moscow."

Vasya read Nina's letter slowly, carefully, word for word. Not only with her eyes, but with her heart.

When she had finished she dropped the letter on her knees, looked at the dry, dusty grass, listened to the angry humming of a bee; it flew about busily among the blades, rose into the air, disappointed, and descended into the grass again. In the spring, when the lilac was blooming, there had been bees, too. But those had been

different, happy bees; this one was angry, as if the summer had played it false.

Vasya thought she was thinking of the bee, and not of the letter. Her heart was numb, seemed not to ache, seemed indifferent to everything. "Satiny arms," "passionate tenderness!" It hurt her so! Slowly, painstakingly, Vasya folded the letter, put it back into the envelope.

Getting up, she walked toward the gate, past the bandstand. The park was silent and empty today. No music. Now Vasya knew whom Vladimir loved, knew that not she, but the other, belonged to him.

Vasya stepped through the gate of the dusty City Park into the noisy street. She felt as if she had left a grave behind her in the park. She was going home from a funeral. The burial of her dead happiness.

CHAPTER XIII

Vladimir had come home earlier than usual. He was smiling with delight, for he had good news: the long-expected summons of the Central Administration, his appointment to the new post, had reached him. He would have to go to Moscow at once.

"To Moscow? All right, go ahead. I'm going away too, but not to Moscow. I'm going home, to my province."

On the surface Vasya was calm as she spoke. The narrow, tinted envelope was in her pocket—the letter from Nina.

Vladimir didn't notice the weariness in Vasya's face. He didn't see the angry light that flashed in her brown eyes. Nor did he wonder why Vasya was putting her things in order, why she was packing.

"You want to visit your friends? All right. Will we meet in Moscow, or will you go directly to the new district?"

Vasya's heart had had one last hope: he would object, wouldn't let her go. Now that, too, was over.

"I'm not going to the new place with you. I've been called back to work. And I'm going to stay there.

Not for a little while, but forever. I've had enough of my rest in this prison. I'm tired of playing the manager's lady. You can take a wife who is able to appreciate this sort of life."

Something seemed to have given way in Vasya. A torrent of words poured from her mouth. She spoke so quickly she had to interrupt herself. She wouldn't let herself be deceived any more. She was glad their love had come to an end. It had been an ordeal for her, to be without work among these syndicate people, these *burshuis!* She had stood it only for Vladimir's sake; and she was hurt because he no longer needed her. He was using her only as a housekeeper, and as a cloak: "Why, my wife is a Communist." But it was the other woman who would give him pleasure and love "in the mysterious little house". A shrewd plan! There was only one thing Vladimir and Nina had forgotten: whether she, Vasya, would agree to lead this disgusting life!

Her eyes were green, spiteful. She had to pause for lack of breath.

Vladimir shook his head in amazement. "Is that you, Vasya? I don't recognize you! If I ever kept anything from you it was only for your sake."

"Thanks! I don't need your pity. I'm strong. Do you think that your love fills my life completely? I'm sick of your love. It's only a thorn in my flesh. I want only to get away from you as quickly as possible, to tear myself away. I'm not at all interested

in what you do. Love, kiss whomever you please. Lie, deceive! Forget who you are! Betray Communism—it doesn't make any difference!"

"Vasya! Vasya! What of our friendship? What of your promise to understand everything?"

"Our friendship? Where is it? Where's that friendship? I don't believe you any more, Vladimir. You've killed my faith in you. If you had come to me and said: 'Vasya, something terrible, something dreadful has happened; I love another'—do you think I would have held you back, or reproached you? Do you think I would have stood in the way of your happiness? You see, Vladimir, you forget that I'm not merely your wife, but your friend and comrade too. And that's what hurt me—that's what I'll never forgive."

The tears flowed over her thin cheeks. Wiping them away with her sleeve, she turned her back on Vladimir.

"I believed in you as in a comrade. But you crushed my faith, pitilessly. And how can we live together when our faith in each other is gone? Now I see clearly that our life together, our happiness is over."

Vasya's heart was heavy; her thin shoulders shook. She sat down on the bed, crushing the silk quilt in her hands. Sitting down beside her, Vladimir put his arm round her.

"Did you say that we've become strangers to each other, that you don't love me any more? No, Vasya. If you didn't love me, you wouldn't suffer so. And

I? Have I stopped loving you? Please try to understand! Yes, I love Nina; but in a different way. My love for you is stronger, deeper. I can't see any course without you, Vasya. Whatever I do, I always wonder: What would Vasya say? What would she advise? You've been my guiding star, and I need you."

"You're always talking about yourself," Vasya complained. "You forget me. I can't live that way. I'm not worrying so much about your getting involved in this affair. What hurts me is that we're not comrades any more."

"Do you think I don't see that? But why? I don't know. When we're parted, we long for each other—when we're together we feel cramped. You said it used to be different. But were we ever together before? We never had any family life. We were always working, saw each other only for a moment. Shall we live that way again, Vasya? Just for the moment! Would you like that? Each to live for himself; and when we want each other, we'll meet. Yes? Will you? Then Vasya will be my dear tomboy again, the only one in the world. And there will be no more lies. We mustn't break off everything forever, in the heat of the moment. That's what hurts. Have pity on me!"

Vladimir buried his head in her lap, as he had always done, and hid his face in her burning hands.

The room was quiet.

A wave of the longing they thought they had forgotten covered both of them with its hot flood. The little ember of passion, buried under the ashes of suspicion and offended feelings, glowed more brightly again.

"Vasya—darling!"

Vladimir's arms embraced Vasya and pulled her on his knee. He covered her lips with kisses, and her body with passionate caresses.

Unresisting, Vasya yielded to the sweet languor she had almost forgotten.

Let it be so! Now Vladimir loved her as before. Altogether. He belonged to her alone, forgot Nina. He was unfaithful to Nina—not only with his body but with his heart and his soul.

Vasya felt a malicious joy out of keeping with her usual character. It grieved her, but she was glad at the same time. Let him be unfaithful.

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The days that followed were curiously sultry. The ember of passion, glowing under the ashes of anger and estrangement, flared up like a charcoal pile fanned into flames by the autumn wind.

Vladimir had become gentle, Vasya was loving and yielding. They seemed to have fallen in love all over again. They could not live without each other. At night they lay clasped in each other's arms, as though

afraid that they might lose each other. Vladimir kissed Vasya's brown eyes, Vasya pressed Vladimir's head to her heart. They had never loved, never possessed each other like this, with bittersweet longing and joy. Had they found love anew, or were they bidding it farewell? Farewell to their lost, irretrievable happiness?

The while she smiled and joked Vasya was afraid of bursting into tears at any moment. Vladimir caressed her, and looked into her brown eyes; but she read infinite sadness in his gaze. Not the mischievous sparkle of joy. His eyes did not mirror Vasya's love. They seemed silently to be saying good-bye to her.

To keep from seeing Volodya's eyes and their tears, to smother that infinite sadness, Vasya put her slender arms around Volodya's neck. She sought his lips; he pressed her to his heart. She yielded to his passionate caresses. He sought her body, insatiably, until both fell asleep, exhausted.

Those were queer days. Hot, sultry, gloomy. They held no happiness, no carefree joy born of love.

They discussed everything. "In the meanwhile," Vasya would go home to her work. When Vladimir would be settled in his new place they would arrange, by letter, when they would meet. Where? They said nothing. Not a word was spoken of the separation. Everything seemed so simple now, so clear and comprehensible, as if there were unadulterated truthfulness between them. But there was one thing Vasya

never mentioned; that she had taken and hidden Nina's letter, that she was keeping it because it might some day be useful to her. She insisted herself that he should telegraph to Moscow that he was coming alone. Why did she want this? It hurt her, but somehow it seemed necessary. At first Vladimir refused, and regarded Vasya suspiciously, as if he were afraid of something. But finally he telegraphed nonetheless—and became even more loving and ardent.

It had to be so. They were drinking the last drops of happiness that remained in the cup of life; and they contained the heady wine of passion, the bitter sweetness of parting.

Vasya was gay, animated, lively. Volodya had not seen her so for a long time.

"I didn't like my skin, so I shed it. What sort of 'manager's lady' am I? You need another sort of wife. Beside, I'm not the least bit suited for the Nep!" Laughing, she teased Volodya.

"I don't know what you are! I only know that you've become Vasya, the tomboy, again. And I won't give up my tomboy, not even if five Party Committees demand you. For a while, yes; but for good—never!"

Vasya laughed. That was how it had to be. They would meet occasionally, as free comrades. But not as man and wife. That would be better.

Vladimir agreed that it would be better so. But he couldn't live without Vasya's clever little curly head.

"There are so few friends in the world, Vasya. Especially nowadays. They're all gone; everyone thinks only of himself. But we're tried friends and true, aren't we, Vasya?"

They talked together as if the wall between them no longer existed; it had been broken down. The serpent in Vasya's heart lay dormant; she thought her jealousy had disappeared. But suddenly, unexpectedly, she felt the sharp fangs again. Vladimir could not free himself of the past. He would talk of Nina; it showed how frequently he thought of her. She was so well educated, he said. She could speak perfect French with Frenchmen, German with Germans. She had learned that in school.

"If she's so well educated, why can't she find work? Or does she prefer to live at the expense of others? I suppose her laziness is in her blood. Besides, it's much more comfortable to be your mistress."

Vasya knew she shouldn't say such things; but she could not restrain herself. The serpent was hurting her; and that was why she wanted to strike Volodya. Let him suffer, too.

Volodya frowned, looked at Vasya reproachfully.

"Why do you say that, Vasya? It's ugly of you. My tomboy Vasya wouldn't say that. It was another Vassilissa Dementyevna."

This stung; Vasya was ashamed of herself. But she could not stop. She tried over and over again to wound

Volodya, until he grew furious, and she came to her senses.

"Don't be angry, dear. Forgive me! I love you. If I didn't love you, I wouldn't torment you so. . . ."

Ecstatic kisses, two bodies seeking each other deliriously—to drown thought and suffering; to forget—to hide the inevitable truth.

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Vasya bade the Party Committee farewell, packed the things in the house. She was concerned about everything, with the scrubbing rags, the hemp mats, and the straw. She consulted with Marya Semyonovna, held important conferences with her; how to pack everything so that nothing would be damaged or broken, so that everything would arrive safely in the manager's new home.

"Why do you bother so much about it?" grumbled Marya Semyonovna. "If you're going back home, why do you work so hard? Mark my word: the moment you're gone that little lady'll be there to take your place. And you're working and worrying for her!"

Why not? Let it be so. She was not helping him as his wife; a wife would never have done it, would have condemned Vladimir: why had he become a *burshui?* But now this had nothing to do with her. He was living for himself, and she for herself. Each was

going his own way. But they were comrades. Why shouldn't she help him? Not because he was her husband, not because he demanded, expected, or wished it. No; but as a comrade, as a friend. Nor was she angry with him. If he wanted to take along all that trash, and to burden the national freight lines with his cases of dishes and his trunks of silks, it was his own affair! This was the parting of the ways for them. She could not go through life hand in hand with him; but why shouldn't she help him pack?

Volodya could not believe his own eyes. Since when had she become such a housewife? He sang her praises to Ivan Ivanovitch and the members of the administration. But again and again he asked Vasya who would put his new house in order if she didn't come along.

"Who? Why, what's the matter with Nina Constantinovna? Or doesn't she want to soil her little white hands? She's a fine lady—everything has to be prepared for her, and handed her on a silver platter. By others, at the expense of others."

She had hurt Volodya, and she was sorry. Why? He looked at her reproachfully, as if to ask: Why, Vasya?

"My darling, my sweetheart—I'm nasty, I know it! But it's only because I love you. Don't be angry, dear. I was only joking."

She hid her face on Volodya's breast, endeavored to swallow the tears that were choking her. For she

loved him, come what might! She loved him, suffered, was afraid of losing him. It would be better to die!

"My poor darling. My Vasyuk. I know you—that's why I love you, why I can't tear my heart away from you. There's not another such Vasya in all the world. I'll never have another friend like you!"

And again that bitter, oppressive delirium dulled their senses—again they sought to drown their suffering in love.

"Will you keep a little corner of your heart free for the rebellious 'Anarchist' ?"

"When you're happy, will you think of your tomboy, Vasya?"

It was a queer time. Passionate, gloomy. . . .

FREEDOM

CHAPTER XIV

Knock-knock! Knock-knock!

Vasya was standing before the locked door of her former attic, where Grusha was living now. She knocked. Downstairs they had told her that Grusha had come home from work. But the door was locked. Where was Grusha?

Knock-knock! Knock-knock!

Could she be asleep?

She turned, to see Grusha coming down the hall with a kettle of hot water.

"Grusha!"

"Vassilissa! Dearest! When did you come? So unexpected!"

Setting the teakettle on the floor, Grusha embraced Vasya.

"Do come in. It's your attic after all. I owe my living here only to you. Only wait until I open the door. They steal in this house—it's terrible. I even lock the door when I go for water. Not long ago they took a coat that was hanging in Furyashkin's room. A fall coat, absolutely new. He turned the entire house upside down, and even got the police. But they didn't find anything.

"So, you're home now, Vassilissa! Take off your wraps, wash off the dust of your trip. I was just

going to make tea. Do you want something to eat? I have eggs, bread, and some apples."

Home? Grusha had said she was at home. But could people like Vasya have a "home"?

She looked about. The attic was so familiar. But it wasn't Vasya's attic any more. There was a sewing machine, a dressmaker's model in the corner, pieces of cloth lying about, scraps and short threads on the floor. The walls were bare. Neither Marx nor Lenin, nor the group of tenants celebrating the founding of the community house. Instead, a faded red paper fan. Beside it, a postcard with the picture of an egg and a golden inscription: "Christ hath arisen." An ikon in the corner. Grusha was not a member of the Party. She believed in God and observed the fasts, although she was in favor of the Soviet Government and had many friends among the Communists. She had been engaged to be married; but her fiancé had gone with the Whites, had probably been killed. And if he had been killed, the chances were he had been put to death by the Red Guards. That was why Grusha refused to become a Communist. She cherished the memory of her lover.

"If I should join you he would curse me in the other world."

Before, Vasya had been unable to understand Grusha. How could she love a White? But now she knew that the heart would not obey orders. Vladimir and she had come to the parting of the ways; but her love still was alive, gave her no peace.

Grusha was glad that Vassilissa had come home. She didn't know which would be the best place to give her. She fairly overwhelmed her with news, and wondered why Vasya hadn't gained when she was with her husband. She had come back as thin as she had been, if not thinner. Vasya said nothing. She had thought that when she would see Grusha she would fall into her arms and, weeping, tell her all her troubles. But when they met, Vasya could not open her mouth, could find no words. How could she tell anyone about this sorrow?

The news of Vassilissa's arrival spread through the house. The old tenants were delighted, while the new ones were curious to see what she was like. One of the members of the House Committee grumbled that now she probably would want to get into the administration again. The first to come to Grusha's room were the children, Vasya's old friends of the Children's Club.

The older among them immediately had a complaint to lodge: the Children's Club had been broken up at the time of the Nep. They had said it didn't pay, and that the rooms were needed for other purposes. But where could the children do their lessons now? Their collections had been broken up and their library had been scattered; some of it had even been sold.

Vasya listened. Was such a thing possible? She bridled at once. She would not let the matter rest. She would go immediately to the Party Committee,

to the Educational and Housing Bureaus. Let the Nep attend to its own business; but let it keep its hands off the things the workers had built up laboriously.

"I'll fight them. I won't permit such a thing. Don't worry, children; I'll see to it that you get what's coming to you, even if I have to go to Moscow for it."

The older boys laughed with delight. They believed in Vasya. She would surely attend to it; she was going to fight now. The whole house knew her as "the fighter". That was as it should be. The children were all for Vassilissa.

After the children the old tenants came in to greet her. But the moment they had said: "Good afternoon," each of them had an urgent request to make of her, everyone had his troubles and wanted to tell her about them. Vasya listened patiently to them all. As always, she was interested in everything, advised and consoled them.

The attic was so crowded that it was impossible to turn around.

"Wait a little, Comrades," pleaded Grusha. "You're not giving her a chance to eat. And she's tired, after traveling for so many nights. But you have to come in with your affairs, and get her all mixed up."

"Don't, Grusha. Never mind. I'm not at all tired. What were you telling me, Timofei Timofeiyevitch? Oh yes, about the taxes you're supposed to pay. How

can that be? You're no property owner, nor an employer or manager . . ."

As she uttered the word "manager" she thought of Volodya. But her pain was submerged in the troubles of others. She had no time for it.

Her old friends went away, one by one; and, forgetting her weariness, Vasya decided to go to Party Headquarters and get to work immediately.

She buttoned her coat, listening to Grusha's news the while. One man had married, another had left the Party; this girl had become a member of the Council. Suddenly they heard the voice of the Fedosseyev woman, resounding through the hall.

"Where's our darling, our defender? My precious Vassilissa Dementyevna!" She threw her arms around Vasya's neck, and covered her with moist kisses. At the same time bitter tears were rolling down her cheeks and wet Vasya's face.

"I waited for you so long, dearest! I've been so lonesome for you! I waited for you as for the sunshine. When Vassilissa Dementyevna, our protector, comes back she'll straighten out everything. When she's here the wretch won't dare make his wife a laughing-stock. He'll be ashamed to disgrace the entire house with that slut. She'll sympathize with me because I have to take care of the little children all by myself. She'll take him to court. At least he'll have to submit to the Party. You, our darling, you're my only hope."

As a rule Vasya was able to divine the troubles of others from a few words. But this time she couldn't quite make out what the Fedosseyev woman was wailing about. Of whom was she complaining? Vasya saw that she had changed a great deal, almost beyond recognition. She had been a young, robust, full-bosomed woman—now she had grown thin, old and yellow.

What sorrow was breaking her heart?

Fedosseyev had entered on a love affair with Dora, an "unbaptized" Jewess. He wanted to have nothing to do with his wife, made her the laughing-stock of the entire district. No one could make him ashamed of himself. He had left his own children, was bringing everything to his sweetheart. Here, little girl, that's for you! Let the family die in their corner! Only don't chase me away, me, your pock-marked lover.

"What in the world did that goose Dora see in him?" shrieked the Fedosseyev woman. "If he were a real man . . . ! But he's disgusting. He's so damned filthy! I put up with him for eight years, kissed his pock-marked phiz for the children's sake. Vassilyevitch, I thought, you're an ass, but fate brought us together and the Church married us, so I'll have to stand you. When he would be insistent, he'd make me sick. But I endured him, never looked at anyone else. I thought he'd be grateful to me. I gave all my youth to the filthy beast; and that's what I get for it! I lost my good looks, and he ran after that girl. He had to

get mixed up with a Jewish girl! It's a disgrace for the whole district."

The Fedosseyev woman wept uncontrollably. Vasya listened; and her own heart seemed filled with a dark flood. Here she found her own grief and indignation all over again. She shuddered with disgust. Where had her pluck gone? She no longer felt any desire to go to the Party Committee. She wanted only to bury her head in her pillow, and to see nothing more.

The other, however, continued to sob, to kiss Vassilissa's shoulder, to beg her to bring her husband to reason and to defend the interests of the little children. She should threaten him with a court trial.

* * * * *

As she went home from Party Headquarters, Vasya was surrounded by her Comrades. They couldn't stop talking. And Vasya felt so happy and gay. She had forgotten everything, as if she had never lived for or worried about anything but the Party.

She had grown excited, had quarreled and stood her ground; she had asked questions about everything, and had found out just how the land lay. It had interested and satisfied her. Her head was working, her soul seemed to rise.

She hurried up to her attic without noticing the stairs. Only then she felt her weariness.

While Grusha was preparing supper Vasya lay down on the bed, and fell asleep at once.

Grusha looked at her friend, undecided as to whether she should wake her. She felt sorry for her. Vasya was exhausted; let her sleep.

She undressed Vasya as though she were a child, took off her shoes, and covered her. She hung a shade over the light, and sat down to sew button-holes.

Knock-knock!

Who the devil could be coming now? Grusha muttered angrily. They never let a person alone.

She opened the door. There stood Fedosseyev, the husband.

"What do you want?"

"I want to see Vassilissa Dementyevna. Is she at home?"

"Are you all crazy? She's had a long trip; she's tired, hasn't had a chance to sleep—and you fall on her like a pack of hungry dogs on a bone. Vassilissa Dementyevna is asleep."

Grusha and Fedosseyev had words. Fedosseyev was obstinate, but Grusha refused to let him in. To-morrow. They agreed on the next day.

She banged the door in Fedosseyev's face. A damned filthy fellow. Had a wife and three children, and Dora was big, too. It was beyond Grusha.

She considered that Fedosseyev was in the wrong. And she condemned Dora, too. Why had she started anything with a married man? Weren't there enough bachelors? Grusha's morals were very strict. She kept within bounds; for she still remembered her lover.

When Vasya woke up she felt calm and at peace with the world. The autumn sun was shining through the window, throwing a golden light on the seamstress. Grusha was heating her flatiron on the petroleum stove; she was going to iron a dress.

"For whom is it?"

"For a member of the Executive Committee, for a birthday party."

"What? Are they celebrating birthdays nowadays?"

"I should say so! You ought to see them—it's better than it used to be with the rich people. The table is covered with appetizers, wine, whiskey . . ." Grusha's iron was hissing; she had no time to talk. Vasya stretched on the bed. She remembered it well. It was hard and narrow; yet she had slept in it together with Volodya. How had they ever had room? Now they had been in each other's way even in a wide bed.

It had been different in the old days.

Was her misery trying to creep into her heart again, to disturb her peace of mind? No, everything was quiet in her heart. The calm that follows a storm.

Grusha remembered the appointment with Fedosseyev, and told Vasya about it.

"I don't care. Let him come."

She didn't want to have too much to do with the Fedosseyevs. She seemed offended because these gossips had been overtaken by the same misfortune as she.

She inquired about Dora. Who was she?

"Don't you remember her?" Grusha was amazed. "She's dark and pretty—she danced with the tambourine at the Komsomolsk celebration."

Now Vasya recalled her. Very favorably. She had worked in the tanners' Cultural Committee. A clever girl; and her youth was no drawback. Besides, she sang well. How could the Fedosseyev woman think of comparing with her?

Grusha's view was different. She condemned Dora; the laws had to be observed. If the Communists were to permit husbands to act that way, all the men would desert their wives and little children, and would take on young girls. The Party was going to take proceedings against Dora.

"Take proceedings against her? Only the Fedosseyev woman could be behind that. A disgusting creature!" Vasya defended Dora. "No law could force a man to live with a woman he doesn't love. Do you want to force him to embrace that woman? Even though he loathes her? Even though she's a common sneak?"

Vasya was quite wrought up. She was furious with the Fedosseyev woman; and why? She hardly knew herself. As she fought about the Fedosseyevs she thought of Vladimir. As she defended Dora she saw the white lace parasol and Nina's red lips.

Grusha was surprised to see Vassilissa siding with Fedosseyev.

"You act as if they were your best friends. Weren't you always railing against them? You know how much trouble they caused you. Of course, it's your own affair; but I'd advise you to keep out of this business. There's no use in getting mixed up in a dog fight."

Vasya was stubborn. She would stand up for Dora if there were proceedings against her. "Tell me, if you please: does Fedosseyev's legal wife think she's the only one who has rights? No. She's mistaken. There are other rights, not dictated by human laws. They are the commands of the heart."

As Grusha pressed the hem of the dress she looked at Vasya attentively, as if to read her friend's innermost thoughts.

Vasya frowned. Why did Grusha object? Wasn't Vasya right? Could any law dictate to the heart?

"Who said so? The heart is most important of all. You can't be human if you haven't a heart. But as I look at you now I see clearly that you're heart-sick, too, Vassilissa, that you're suffering. That's why you're defending Fedosseyev. You're thinking of your man, aren't you? And you want to find an excuse for him. I'm right."

Vasya said nothing, but bowed her head.

Grusha asked no more questions. Taking the dress from the ironing-board she shook it out and picked off the loose threads. Now it was finished.

"Are you through?" asked Vasya, thinking of something quite different.

"Yes."

"Well, then I'll go to the Party Committee. Let Fedosseyev wait."

* * * * *

Now came days of hard work for Vassilissa. She was preparing to leave for the weaving works. She conferred with Stepan Alexeyevitch, acquainted herself with her instructions, and spent her evenings at meetings of her responsible co-workers. The hours passed so quickly that she had no time to think, or to listen to her heart.

And then she had her new worries, about the Fedosseyevs and Dora. They and their difficulties gave Vasya no rest.

Fedosseyev had come to her, and had told her everything.

He had met Dora Abramovna in the Cultural Committee. He had been singing in the chorus. Dora Abramovna liked his bass, and took him to a music teacher. She was a musician herself. And she had brought him into the Cultural Committee. That was how it had begun. But his wife soon got wind of it, and then there was trouble.

Fedosseyev complained about his wife; she was spreading all sorts of rumors, and was setting the

Comrades against Dora Abramovna. She was wailing that Dora was "robbing" her family, and was letting Fedosseyev support her. The truth was quite the opposite. Not only did Dora refuse to accept a single kopek from Fedosseyev, but she even helped the family, sharing everything with them. She thought of the children, too, had brought the younger ones into the kindergarten, and had given textbooks and copybooks to the oldest boy, who went to school. Of course she didn't want the wife to know that. Besides, she had made a shirt and tie for Fedosseyev to wear to the concerts. But the malicious gossips had it just the other way.

Fedosseyev was grieved on Dora's account. It wouldn't hurt him. But he was worried about her, lest she get into difficulties with the Party because of him. It was all his wife's fault; she insisted on being in their way.

Listening to Fedosseyev, Vasya couldn't help thinking of Vladimir and Nina. They too had suffered like this, had sought a way out, had been angry at Vasya because she prevented them from being happy. She had advised the Fedosseyev woman to get out of the way of her own accord. It was impossible to block the happiness of others; no matter how many barriers you would put in its path, you couldn't keep it from flying over your head. But what was Vasya herself doing? Was not she, too, standing in the way? Was she not still standing guard over the happiness that had been?

Fedosseyev loved Dora. When he spoke of her his face seemed to shine. She had seen the same change in Vladimir when he thought of Nina.

"Dora Abramovna has a heart of gold. In the union everybody's fond of her, too. Those who don't belong to the Party don't think it'll take any action against her. But if it does, they'll be only too happy. 'Let her come to us independents; we'll take Dora Abramovna's part, never fear!' "

Fedosseyev had hardly left Vasya when his wife caught hold of her, kissed her shoulders, and begged her to be on her side.

Vasya, who didn't like Fedosseyeva, crossly waved her away. Whereupon she filled the entire house with her shouting about Dora, about her husband, and about Vasya, abusing all three of them at once.

Vasya met Dora at Party headquarters. They found a corner where the typists were busily pounding away at their machines, where the noise permitted them to talk without being overheard.

Dora was pretty, with clever eyes. Vasya liked her.

She was trying to hide her pregnancy with a shawl.

Dora began to speak of her own accord. Not of herself, but of Fedosseyev. She looked after him, esteemed him, admired his talent; his voice was excellent, as good as Chaliapin's. All he needed was to study. That was why Dora wanted to marry him. So that he could break away from his family and

from his cobbling, so that he could devote himself entirely to his singing.

But although she spoke highly of Fedosseyev Dora also bewailed his indecision. As long as he was with her he was prepared to do anything, fully determined to leave his wife and put through the divorce. But as soon as he came home it was finished. He would give in, and she would have to begin all over again. She had been working on him for so many months! And unsuccessfully.

Vasya grew disturbed as she listened to Dora. Might not Nina have spoken of Vladimir in the same way?

Dora didn't care a rap for all the formalities of divorce and marriage. It was all nonsense in her eyes; she favored a free union. But Fedosseyeva would never let them live in peace unless they were registered in the Commissariat; therefore Dora was making the most of her being 'in the family way' to move Fedosseyev and induce him to get the divorce. She wasn't afraid of motherhood. She would be able to take care of herself without a husband too.

To move him? To force him to get the divorce? Had Nina done that, too? Dora, praising Fedosseyev, was expecting Vasya to voice her approval.

But Vasya was thinking of her own troubles. Dora saw only the good in Fedosseyev. Nina probably loved Vladimir in the same way. Vasya was different. She saw Vladimir's bad points, too. She loved him and

suffered for his faults; they distressed her, and she wanted to reform him. Might this not have hurt Volodya?

"Why does his wife cling to him so?" Dora spoke wrathfully. "Because they used to love each other? But that was so long ago! Now there's nothing to keep them together. She doesn't really know him—she can't appreciate him—she doesn't understand him at all!"

Ah, thought Vasya, that's how it was with Vladimir and me. He didn't know what I wanted, and I couldn't understand his ideas. Our paths went off in different directions.

"He's a stranger to his wife; they're different in every respect—in their tastes and in their ideals. She wants to keep him as a husband, but she doesn't need him as a man. He's not essential in her life."

And she, Vasya—did she need Vladimir as a man? Was he essential to her?

As she asked herself this question her heart answered distinctly: No, she did not need him—not as he was now. But Dora could not help going on: "What sort of love is that? They can't bear each other. It's a cat-and-dog life. Every man for himself. Neither friendship, nor faith in each other."

Yes, thought Vasya. Yes; neither friendship, nor faith in each other.

"And we, Comrade Fedosseyev and I, understand each other as if we had only one heart, one soul."

So that was the love of Vladimir and Nina.

Vasya seemed to understand it only now. She grew thoughtful.

She had much to do. Urgent Party affairs, preparations for her departure. Yet she didn't forget the Fedosseyevs. She did her best to hasten the divorce, tried to reconcile Fedosseyev with his Comrades, and to defend Dora.

All this seemed important, very important for Vasya. She couldn't explain why.

* * * * *

Vasya was hurrying home from Party headquarters. She was to leave for the weaving works the next day. Her head was whirling. How reorganize the work, follow orders and adapt herself to the many who didn't belong to the Party? The independents were just like the Communists nowadays. They wanted to penetrate more and more deeply into everything, to investigate everything themselves. They took nothing on faith. If you didn't have a sound basis for your statements you might just as well not talk to them.

Her head was full of all this. She seemed to have forgotten her heartache. She felt as if she had never lost her man, her friend—as if she had not lived through an entire summer as "the manager's lady".

Vasya hurried along. She had had nothing to eat since morning. And when she thought of food she

felt sick, everything seemed to grow dark, her head was reeling. How long? Was she going to be ill, or . . .

A suspicion rose in her mind. It was almost three months since her last period. Oughtn't she to look up Marya Andreyevna, the physician? She lived right here, in one of the side streets. They had worked together in the organization of the nursery for the community houses. She would have to find out what the trouble was. Vasya couldn't go to her new work if she was sick.

She turned into the side street, went up to the little white house, and rang the bell. The physician, Marya Andreyevna, opened the door herself.

"How in the world did you happen to come here? Is it a business matter, or do you want my professional advice?"

Vasya was on pins and needles; she felt embarrassed, and even blushed.

After watching her carefully for a while Marya Andreyevna put her hand on her shoulder.

"Come into my office—I'll examine you."

Marya Andreyevna inquired about Vasya's appetite, her periods, her dizziness. She seemed to know everything in advance. She examined Vasya.

It was disagreeable and embarrassing for Vasya. She had never consulted a gynecologist before. She was almost frightened when she had to sit down on the examination chair.

As she dressed, her hands trembled so that she couldn't fasten the hooks.

Marya Andreyevna stood before the wash-stand in her white smock, and painstakingly scrubbed her hands with soap and a brush.

For a while neither spoke.

"Well, dear Comrade Vassilissa, I don't know whether you'll be glad or sorry, but there's no doubt about it. You're in the family way."

Vasya was surprised. But in a moment a smile flitted over her face. A baby? That would be nice.

"Will you go back to your husband now?" asked the white-smocked physician as she dried her hands on an embroidered towel.

"To my husband? No." Vasya shook her head. "I'm not going back to him—we've separated. Each of us is going his own way."

"You've separated? This is a fine time for it! How will you arrange things now? We may yet be able to stop the business. What do you say? Where will you go all alone with your child? You're not strong."

"I'm not alone, though. Tomorrow I'm leaving for the weaving works. There's a fine group there, mostly women, weavers. We'll all work together there, organize a nursery. Oh, yes, that's what I wanted to ask you: how did you make the nursery self-supporting? Tell me about it, please, and advise me."

They discussed the nursery, subsidies, contributions, the payment of professional employes. Vasya forgot

the "news" about herself. Marya reminded her of it when she was leaving.

"Don't undertake too much work! Remember that your health is none too good. I'm afraid for you, my dear!"

She gave Vasya some advice. One thing was prohibited, while another was good for her. Vasya listened, and tried to remember everything. For the child's sake. It should be a strong baby. It was so little, so helpless . . .

She reached the street, smiled as she walked along.

A baby! That would be nice. She would show the other women how to raise a child in the Communist way. There was no need for a kitchen, for family-life and all that nonsense. The thing to do was to organize a nursery, a self-supporting community house. Practice was better than preaching.

Vasya was so occupied with the idea of self-support that she even forgot her child. The thought of Vladimir, however, never entered her mind, as though he had had nothing to do with it.

Vasya was packing. A box containing Volodya's picture and his letters fell over. On the top of the pile lay a narrow, tinted envelope, Nina Constantinovna's letter.

Vasya looked at it, turned it over and over. She knew it by heart, yet she wanted to read it again. It would revive her heartache; but she could not resist it. Whenever she read it the old pain again gnawed

at her heart; then it would freeze—that was her wrath against Vladimir. Why had he lied? Why had he deceived her?

She took up the letter, went closer to the window. It was growing dark. She unfolded the familiar sheet. She read it carefully, every word.

But the gnawing pain was gone. And the serpent, that venomous tormentor, seemed to have lost its strength.

Instead, Vasya felt pity stirring in her heart. Sympathy for Nina Constantinovna's tears. Sympathy with the grief, the sorrow, the distress of another woman's heart. She remembered Nina going away from the bandstand, wiping away her tears with her fingers.

Why had she suffered? Why had she exposed herself to such anguish? She had expected a baby; and she had got rid of it. Why?

Going over to the table, Vasya pushed aside Grusha's pieces of cloth, set down the ink and began to write a letter.

"Nina Constantinovna!

"I don't know you, have no idea of what you really are. I've seen you only once. And I will tell you quite frankly that I didn't like you. But when you cried, as you went away from the bandstand, my heart understood your pain and suffered with you.

"I have just reread your letter to Vladimir Ivanovitch. I'm returning it to you; my taking it was quite unwarranted, and I kept it from Vladimir. But it has served its purpose. So you needn't be angry with me on this account.

"I've thought a great deal about your letter. Now that I have just reread it I know that I cherish no grudge against you, that I'm not angry with you any more. I see that you, too, have suffered much because of me. Let me, therefore, tell you what I've already told Vladimir: We've had enough of this game of hide and seek. You must become Vladimir Ivanovitch's wife, his legal wife. The two of you are better suited to each other. I'm not the proper wife for him, for our tastes differ, and our lives run in different directions. I never know what he thinks, and he doesn't understand me.

"When we separated, Vladimir and I, it was not because you had stolen him away from me; you could take possession of his heart only because he no longer loved me. I shall continue to live now just as I used to live before without Vladimir. You, however, actually cannot live without him. It is always so when two people love each other.

"Vladimir Ivanovitch and I lived in a free union, so that no divorce is required.

"I do not reproach you. If I had known sooner how you love each other, I would have done this long ago. Tell Vladimir Ivanovitch that I feel no bitterness

toward him, but will always be his friend, as I always used to be. And should you ever need anything I shall always be ready to help you or to be of service to you. There was a time when my heart held little love for you. But now that I understand everything I feel only deep sympathy for you, for all your tears, for the suffering and heartache of a woman. I wish you great happiness, as I would a sister. Remember me to Vladimir, and tell him to take good care of his bride.

"In any case, I'm giving you my new address. If you want to write me, I will answer. For we aren't enemies, Nina Constantinovna, even though, unintentionally, we caused each other much pain. Neither of us wanted to hurt the other.

"Good-bye. I wish you all the happiness in the world.

"Vassilissa Malygina."

At the end of the letter she wrote down her exact address. Then she put both letters into an envelope, moistened the flap with her tongue, and pasted it together.

Then, suddenly, her soul—not her reason—told her: this is the end.

The end? But where was the pain?

There was no pain.

Where was her grief? Her gnawing, benumbing grief?

The grief, too, had gone.

Volodya "the American" was there—not Vladimir Ivanovitch. She thought of Vladimir and saw Nina. She thought of Nina, and Vladimir appeared beside her.

As though they had become one for Vasya—one, indivisible, inseparable.

One. The thought of it did not hurt her. Let them be one.

Her heart was calm, full of peace. Like a garden after a tempest.

* * * * *

Vasya stood beside the window, enjoying the sunset. The sun was sinking behind purple, gold-edged clouds, as in a storm. The crows were circling over the earth, cawing, seeking a shelter for the night.

The air smelled of dry leaves, mushrooms and autumn earth. Fragrant, refreshing, familiar. Not spicy and enervating, as in Vladimir's country.

Vasya drew a deep breath, avidly drinking in the air.

Yes, life was beautiful.

She leaned out of the window. In the little courtyard Grusha was hastening to get the clean clothes off the line while it was still daylight.

"Grusha. Grusha. Come here, quick. I have some news. Good news. . . ."

"I'm on my way."

She came in, threw the laundry on the bed.

"What's the news? Did you get a letter?"

"A letter? Yes, it's a letter; but I didn't get it—I wrote it. Guess to whom!"

"To none other than Vladimir Ivanovitch, I'm sure."

"But you're wrong! Not to him, but to the little lady, his wife, Nine Constantinovna."

Grusha was astonished. "Why did you do that?"

"You see, Grusha, when I read that letter of Nina's over again I felt so sorry for her. After all she suffered, too, on my account. And she lost a baby because of me. She endured everything, grieved, was miserable. And why? We're not rivals, after all. We're not enemies. If she had taken Vladimir from me in cold blood, without love, I would never have forgiven her, would always have been furious at her. But now that I really understand her. . . . For she loves Vladimir. She loves him very much, more than I do. And she's right.

"Life without Vladimir means nothing to her. That's why she writes: 'I can't live without you!' Do I need Vladimir? I've thought it over, Grusha, many times; and now I realize that I won't grieve for him. If Volodya 'the American' could come back, it would be different. I long for him, Grusha, for the old Volodya. But, you see, the American doesn't exist any more! And he'll never return! So why should I torment Nina? Why disturb the happiness of these two? What do I care about the 'manager'? I don't need him."

"Yes," agreed Grusha, "you don't need the manager. That's the worst of it, the way so many of our men have deserted us to become managers. But don't be unhappy, Vassilissa. There are plenty of our boys left. Just look at those who don't belong to the Party! You'll find true Communists among them, real proletarian Communists."

"Of course, we're getting new recruits. But the others? They exchanged their proletarianism long ago for lamps and quilts. They don't understand us. So, you see, Grusha, I thought: Why torment Nina? Why hold on to Vladimir? He was neither married nor free. What was the sense in that state of affairs? It would have to be stopped; and that without bitterness. They had suffered enough. I didn't quite understand all this when I left Vladimir. I was still expecting something, hoping for something. I thought that if Vladimir left me for another woman I would die of grief. I was numbed with pain when I came here: I didn't even notice the trip. But when I went to work in the Party Committee, when others came to me with their worries and troubles, it seemed to me that my sorrow was gone. Will you believe me? I can honestly say that I feel neither bitterness nor jealousy. Everything is calm and quiet."

"Mother of God, I thank thee!" Grusha quickly crossed herself, and glanced at the ikon in the corner. "I did not kneel and pray to our Holy Lady all these

nights in vain, Vassilissa. 'Help a woman's heart,' I prayed. 'Help Vassilissa.'"

Vasya smiled. "Stop, Grusha! You're incorrigible! Do you still believe in ikons? But what you said is true: I'm cured. How many months was I walking about like a somnambulist! I wasn't conscious. I didn't live. I forgot the Party. But now I'm well again. Everything delights me now, everything's new to me. The old world still goes round. Vladimir may be gone, but the Party is there. That's how I felt after I had typhus, when I began to recuperate."

"I'm only afraid that you'll have another attack, that your husband'll write some more of those damned letters of his."

"No, Grusha, that won't happen again!" Thoughtfully Vasya shook her head. "My heart has changed altogether. I resent nothing, reproach him with nothing; my jealousy of Nina has disappeared. But my pity for them remains. All three of us were lost in a labyrinth. We were angry at one another. And we couldn't find the way out before we had lost our bitterness. When I took Nina into my heart I stepped out of that maze of suffering. It was not because I forgave her; what did I have to forgive? But I sympathized with her as with a sister, for she had known a woman's pain, and had suffered as much as I. Not through her own fault, but because life still hasn't reached the ideal. I pitied her and I felt better."

"And it couldn't be otherwise if you don't love him any more. Love always brings suffering. It gives you a little joy—but sorrow follows it like a shadow. And when you feel no more pain your love's at an end, too."

"That's not true, Grusha; you mustn't look at things that way," Vasya shook her head. "I haven't stopped loving Vladimir. He's still in my heart. But my love has changed. It no longer makes me miserable; I'm not angry at him any more. I am grateful to him for the love that has been, for the happiness we felt together. Why should I be vexed with Vladimir? As long as he loved me we were happy. Now he has stopped loving me—who's to blame for that? I thank him for what has been. I feel as if Vladimir had become my brother, and Nina my sister."

"I can't quite see your regarding Nina as a sister. You're trying to fool yourself, Vassilissa. Don't try to be too clever—don't be a super-Communist. Of course it's better that you've forgiven Vladimir about Nina. Forgiven and forgotten. Out of your heart, and out of your mind. But as for love—don't! Keep your love, your heart for the workers instead. They're having a hard time now. Many of them have lost faith in themselves. They don't get much out of your Party doctrines. Give them something more, food and warmth for the heart. I'm not a member of the Party, but I see everything nevertheless. Just ask me, Vassilissa, and I'll always tell you the truth."

"I know you're with us, Grusha; we all know that. But why do you still insist on believing in your ikons? Now, don't pout, don't be offended. I won't say another word. I won't tease you any more, and I won't quarrel with you. I'm in such a festive mood today, Grusha. I feel so happy, so gay, so free! And do you know who cured me? Do you? Try to guess!"

"I can't imagine!"

"The Fedosseyevs."

"You don't mean it! Then let that Fedosseyev woman be forgiven for all her sins and meanness!"

They laughed.

"But I haven't even told you the biggest news of all, Grusha. I saw the doctor. I'm expecting a baby."

"A baby?" Grusha clapped her hands. "Really? Then how could you let your husband go? Will you let the baby be fatherless, or are you going to be fashionable, and have an abortion?"

"Why an abortion? Let the child grow. I don't need a man. That's all they can do—be fathers! Look at the Fedosseyev woman with her three children—they didn't keep her husband from going to Dora."

"That's all very well; but how will you bring it up all by yourself?"

"All by myself? The organization will bring it up. We'll fix up a nursery. And I'll bring you over to work there. You like children, too. Then it'll be our baby. We'll have it in common."

Again they laughed.

"But now, Grusha, I have to hurry with my packing. The train leaves early in the morning. I'm going to my work tomorrow. I'm going to arrange everything just as I want it. Stepan Alexeyevitch has given me his blessing. Back to work! Grusha, do you realize the joy of that?"

She seized Grusha's hands, and the two danced about the room like children. They almost knocked over the dressmaker's model.

They laughed uproariously. Even the people downstairs in the courtyard could hear them.

"We must live, Grusha! Live!"

FINIS